Buzz Bombs: *The Room*, *Snakes on a Plane* and Cult Audiences in the Internet Era

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ABSTRACT

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Derek Godin

This thesis will chart the lives of two films released in the 21st century that had audiences identifiable as cult: *The Room* (Tommy Wiseau, 2003) and *Snakes on a Plane* (David R. Ellis, 2006). It will cover each film's conception, production history, release, reception and ongoing half-life. But special focus will be given in each case to the online activities of the fans, be it creating fan art or spreading word of these particular films. Specifically, this thesis will discuss online fan activity pertaining to both films, and how each film and fan activities related to each fit in the context of fan studies and cult studies. This thesis is not so much about cult films per se but about how cult audiences are created and maintained in the age of modern, Web-based practices and phenomena (promotional web pages, blogging, forums, memetics, and so on).

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For everyone who has ever huddled around a screen with friends to watch a crappy movie and have a great time.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between movie and audience is one of the cornerstones of film analysis. By focusing on who watches certain movies, as well as when and how, we can find recurring themes and patterns which shed light a number of issues. These can range anywhere from demographics to politics and socio-economic stature. In a broad sense, this thesis will place the general notion of fandom in the context of contemporary modes of viewership and sharing. Special attention will be given to how the Internet has facilitated decentralized fandom and enables an ease of "word-of-mouth" sharing that would have been more difficult to achieve in a prior era.

One of the subsections of film studies in which fan activity is most central is cult studies. Though, as I will explain a little later, the exact definition of a cult film is still elusive today, one of the core elements that links the vast majority of cult movies is a vocal and active fan base. To start off, the obvious: cult films would not be even worth considering in most respects if it weren't for their fan bases. The films themselves run the gamut from belatedly-crowned masterpieces to transcendentally terrible misses. The thing that ties them together as an interesting subject of analysis is the fan base. The basis for my analysis of how fan communities operate in a more general way is the work of Matt Hills and Henry Jenkins. Hills' *Fan Cultures* overviews the social and economic aspects of fandom, while Jenkins' work in *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture* talks about fandom and its relation to genre, distribution method, and the influence of the Internet on fan groups. The latter title is much more current, what with its assessments of how the Internet has shaped not only the reception of texts by fans, but how said fans have participated in the curation and receptive half-life of their preferred work of art of choice.

This last concept runs parallel with similar ideas of fan engagement already present in cult film studies.

Cult studies themselves are relatively young; prior to the midnight movie boom of the 1970s, not much critical attention was paid to the misfits and outcasts of the studio system, and even less to the independents roughing it out on the outskirts of major metro areas. By all accounts, though, the first inkling of what would ultimately become cult studies was an essay called "Film Cults" written by a film critic from Philadelphia called Harry Alan Potamkin and published in 1932. In it, he uses the term "cult" in the traditional, unflattering way meant to connote religious zealotry. Potamkin was a politically-minded critic of a Marxist bent, and lamented the "intellectual selling-out" entailed by considering films as "passing amusement[s]." He goes on to say that "cults are never self-critical. And being never self-critical, they are never objective." (Potamkin 231) Though Potamkin himself has an uneasy relationship with the film cult, one of the core tenets of cult studies is already in place as early as this essay: highbrow analysis of lowbrow entertainment.

Certainly, the idolatry that Potamkin decried in "Film Cults" certainly hasn't subsided, but there was no way for him to predict that that same idolatry could end up being politically charged. In Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," one of the totemic pieces of proto-cult writing, the author lays out a 58-point outline of what "camp" is. The first point is probably the most succinct: "To start very generally, Camp is a certain mode of aestheticism. It is one way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon. That way, the Way of Camp, is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization." (Sontag 275) Camp's offbeat aesthetic forms a good portion of the DNA of

cult movies, along with a sense of communal ritual outlined and an affected sense of taste.

The first major work on the subject of cult film proper was the J. Hoberman/Jonathan Rosenbaum collaboration *Midnight Movies*, published in 1983. In it, both esteemed critics dissect and analyze the hows and whats of cult movie touchstones like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Jim Sharman, 1975), *Eraserhead* (David Lynch, 1977), *El Topo* (Alejandro Jodorowsky, 1970) and the films of John Waters. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was, in fact, the first major beacon in the world of cult film, a massive, still-ongoing phenomenon in a league of its own with regard to fan dedication and participation. But arguably the most influential piece of work in the field of cult studies to come out of the 1980s was Umberto Eco's "*Casablanca*: Cult Movies and Intertextual Collage" (1985), an attempt to break down the venerable Michael Curtiz film to its constituent parts and see what makes it adored by cultists. Among other things, Eco argued that cult films gain said status when they appreciated out of context:

> I think that in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their relationship with the whole. [...] [A movie] must already be ramshackle, rickety, unhinged in itself. A perfect movie, since it cannot be reread every time we want, from the point we can choose, as happens with a book, remains in our memory as a whole, in the form of a central idea or emotion; only an unhinged movie survives as a disconnected series of images, of peaks, of visual icebergs. It should display not one central idea but many. It should not reveal a coherent philosophy of composition. It must live on, and because of, its glorious ricketiness.

While Eco certainly has a point with regard to the appeal of the unhinged and the imperfect when talking about cult film audiences, his assertion that a cult film can only truly be so when divorced of context doesn't hold water. Eco basically postulates that a so-called perfect movie is not remembered as series of moments, but as a feeling. This is the "coherent philosophy of composition" he refers to a little bit later on. It's as if he feels that, due to way they are constructed (solid and airtight vs. ramshackle and rickety), that "perfect" films (presumably non-cult movies or at the very least canonical movies, though Eco might have been being facetious here) cannot be considered as a series of scenes and to deconstruct them would rob them of their perfection. This is patently untrue, since even the most classical canon film offers moments that can be called, using his colourful terminology, "visual icebergs."

In fact, a similar idea has been coined without the consideration for the "perfection" of "cultishness" of a given film. In his book *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, Middlebury College professor Christian Keathley coins the term "cinephiliac moment," which refers to a particular moment that a movie goer latches on to without said moment having been designed to do so. (30) The examples of the latter given by Keathley include the climax in *Stagecoach* and an act break in *The Third Man.* (33) Says Keathley: "[these moments] do not qualify as 'cinephiliac moments' as I am using that term because they are precisely designed to be memorable. [...] The moments I am interested in are those that achieve that level of memorability – especially if only subjectively – even though they are not designed to." (33)

On the surface, one might think that these moments line up very well with Eco's notion of moments out of context, but it is in fact their formal context that gives the

cinephiliac moment their very power. They are moments that stick out amidst the received structured nature of film making, fleeting and spontaneous. It's like peering through the movie and seeing the reality on the other side. These “holes” and “imperfections” are important not because they disregard context, but *because* of the context they find themselves in, which in the case in narrative filmmaking. Cult films are important because they tend to have more of these unwitting moments of affect per minute than other films. These moments give us a glimpse into the marginalia of film language in a way that “perfect” films cannot. Other scholars, including J. P. Telotte and Barry K. Grant, argued that Eco's views on *Casablanca* as a cult film and the inner workings of same rang false, with both men contributing articles to the former's 1991 cult studies compendium *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason*. The book, though indebted to the previously-mentioned Hoberman/Rosenbaum collaboration, was the first of its kind in academia. (Mathijs/Sexton 4)

Cult films are also important because they buck what we see as “standard” movie-going/cinephilia, thus making it an inherently politically-charged mode of viewership. In *La distinction* (1979), Pierre Bourdieu outlines his theory that, in essence, social strata dictates taste, and that the lower strata (i.e. middle- and lower-class groups) defines their own tastes relative to the dominant social group. Channelling Lester Bangs, Jeffrey Sconce's article “Trashing the Academy” (1995) superimposes Bourdieu's theory onto film academia, where the upper class is understood as being the established method of teaching film studies and the canon that comes with it, while the cultists and other champions of paracinema are the self-styled proles. Appreciation of bad film thus basically acts as a conduit to the appreciation of non-dominant modes. It is built upon the premise that

cultdom and cinephilia are one and the same, and that using one word to connote "appreciation of the canon" and another to denote "appreciation of trash" is foolish and counterproductive to talking about the medium and those who interact with it. Though Sconce does point out that there is a difference between this particular kind of paracinematic appreciations and Susan Sontag's previously-mentioned notions of camp; "what makes paracinema unique [...] is its aspiration to the status of 'counter-cinema.'" (Sconce) Thus, at the core of the cultists appreciation is still an offbeat sense of aesthetics and interest in the excessive, but a sense of stratified championing. The bigger the cult, the likelier that film being fetishized will gain traction. This is why tracking and analyzing specific fan bases is important in this context.

Another important sub-section of cult film studies is considering the impact that new technologies have had on viewing practices. With the advent of affordable recording technology came a rise of direct-to-video fare, usually a boon to the horror, science fiction or action genres (not to mention pornography). This was the first time that films could have post-theatrical release vitality as far as viewership was concerned. Home video greatly expanded the availability and rewatchability of movies, and aided in the deconstruction of same. It was during this time that watching a movie shifted from being a one-off event that you had to catch or miss forever to something you could do repeatedly for a bit more money. This first wave of home video technology, whose notable formats were VHS, Laserdisc and Betamax, was the first to drag movie watching experience from the theatre to the home on a truly mass scale. Though these systems only truly cause paradigmatic shifts when they become affordable. Case in point: the first three commercially available films on VHS were released in 1977. They were *M*A*S*H*

(Robert Altman, 1970), *Patton* (Franklin J. Schaffner, 1970) and *The Sound of Music* (Robert Wise, 1965), and VHS copies of the film were worth anywhere between 50$ to 70$ USD at the time. (Wasser 97) The boom would truly take flight in the mid-1980s, when major films such as *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) and *E.T.* (Steven Spielberg, 1982), and legacy Walt Disney Studios titles (specifically the post-*Sleeping Beauty* releases in the Walt Disney Classics line of reissues circa 1986) were released on home video, priced to own (between 20$ and 30$ USD), as opposed to priced-to-be bought in bulk for rental stores. (Wasser 163)

It's in this spirit of accessibility to fans that a once-forgotten or ignored movie can find an small, fervent audience. The arrival of the Internet in the cultural mainstream in the late 1990s had a similar effect. Suddenly, decades upon decades' worth of movies progressively became available to anyone with access to an Ethernet port. To this day, cinephiles continue to upload, with various degrees of reprisal[1], bargain-bin cheapies from the 1980s and classic-era studio curios. The operative word is *sharing*. In addition to the old-school ways in which fan bases are created (ad campaigns and words-of-mouth), we can add newer, Web-specific methods like video sharing and specialized peer-to-peer torrenting sites. Someone doesn't have to peruse garage sales and second-hand stores in hopes of seeing, say, *Penn and Teller Get Killed* (Arthur Penn, 1989) again[2]. In this sense, the Internet is the great equalizer. In time, everything has a chance of finding its rightful

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[1] You can upload *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) to YouTube, but it will be taken down in an instant due to copyright laws. Curiously, YouTube seems more lax when it comes to fare like *Kickboxer 4: The Aggressor* (Albert Pyun, 1994), which has accumulated 600,000 views in a little more than a year, and is still free to view in its entirety on the website.

[2] This is just one example of a film with a small following whose only home video release to date is on VHS. Many films involving music have a difficult time to make it to home video due to rights issues with the soundtrack. For example, Warner's cult punk/new wave documentary *Urgh! A Music War* (Derek Burbidge, 1982) has yet to get a home video release.

fan base.

This is why looking at cult films and fandom through the lens of the Internet is important: because the exercise sheds light on a sorely under-discussed segment of the film studies world. That is, it focuses on notions of online fandom specifically regarding films with a specific kind of modest, non-traditional success. Much had been said about fan culture in relation to "bigger" cult film like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* or even huge franchises with rabid cult-style followings, such as *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek*. There has also been ample discussion, notably by Mr. Jenkins, about how online practices inform fan activity and behaviour. What this thesis is more interested in is the specific ways in which the movies in question acquire and retain fans (or don't, in the case of case-study #1 *Snakes on a Plane* [David R. Ellis, 2006]) when the Internet is a major player in its promotional life and that of their fans. It's a chance to see a particular kind of mediated interaction interaction between the Internet and a fan base without the benefit of a prior association or reputation.[3]

Cult studies themselves cast a relatively wide net and utilize a number of different approaches. In addition to the fan-centric methods outlined above, there are also a number of text-centric ways to analyze a cult phenomenon. The Barthes/Metz school of cinematic semiotics shed light onto the symbolic patterns that appear from film to film, and Pierre Bourdieu's notions of hierarchical taste can help make sense of the how and why of the popularity of certain cult items. While the thesis will briefly touch upon the latter later on, it will mostly focus on online fan communities and how they have influenced the reception of two key texts when discussing 21st-century psychotronica, and how these same two

[3] *Star Trek* was initially a 60s phenomenon, both *Star Wars* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have their roots in the culture of the 1970s and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy has already been adapted once (in two parts) a good twenty years before Peter Jackson came along.

movies fit in the context of the "classical" cult film as outlined by Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik in their cult-film essay collection, *The Cult Film Reader.*

This paper will chronicle the ongoing lives of two American motion pictures, one of which has steadily gained cult status to become the largest homegrown cult phenomenon since the heyday of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. That one would be *The Room*, an independent drama film released in 2003. It was written, directed, and produced by its star, Tommy Wiseau. The other one was an attempt at spinning pre-release buzz *into* a pre-fab cult phenomenon.[4] The movie in question here is *Snakes on a Plane*, an action-thriller released in 2006 that starred Samuel L. Jackson in the leading role. These two movies are, in many ways, diametrically opposed to each other. The former is an independently-produced drama that was self-released and, as I will talk about in more detail later on, was kept in a single theatre in Los Angeles through the sheer force of Tommy Wiseau's will (and wallet). The latter was a studio-financed piece of genre fare that did modestly well at the box office but was ultimately unable to retain its fan base after its release. It would, however, have a small resurgence of popularity once it was released on home video. Even still, its lifespan even during its highest highs could not (and continues to not) rival that of *The Room*. This paper will attempt to chart these arcs more accurately with regard to (but not limited to) fan participation, distribution models, Dawkinsian memetics and cult film theory. With regard to fan participation, this paper will expand upon ideas brought forth by Hills and Jenkins, but can be summarized here by an excerpt of John Fiske's essay "The Cultural Economy of Fandom:"

> More traditional texts, such as film, can also be participated in communally and publicly by their fans. This makes public and visible the widespread but

4 It would ultimately fail in this endeavour and become just another short-lived viral sensation.

> more private involvement of, say, soap opera fans in "sharing" the lives of their favourite characters by writing and rewriting their narratives in talk and imagination. Cult films such as *The Blues Brothers* and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* have regular fan screenings (typically at midnight or on the weekend) that are carnivals of fan participation.

There will also be a focus on fandom and the way it is manifested online. To put it briefly here, the way that fans engage online, especially with regards to *Snakes on a Plane*, splits the difference between the "private" viewership referred to by Fiske in his essay and by Jenkins throughout *Textual Poachers* and the more open, communal public viewings that is more commonly associated with midnight/cult pictures. Examples include fan art, webcomics, parody videos, Flash games, and blog posts. There will also be a brief look at how the fan reception of *Snakes on a Plane* actually influences the actual film-making process in its own small way. Though, it did not have so much sway that the film became entirely dictated by its fans. *Snakes on a Plane* will also be used to demonstrate the small but important difference between the concepts of *memetic* (as understood in the Dawkinsian sense, i.e. a unit of culture transferred from person to person and robust enough to last a long time) versus that of *virality* (as understood in the Gladwellian sense, i.e. something that spreads like a virus from person to person but does not have the relative staying power of a Dawkinsian meme).

Now, over the course of this thesis, I will be referring to multiple movies as cult movies. At this juncture, it would be important to delineate what exactly I mean when I invoked the term "cult film". There are as many definitions of "cult film" as there are people writing on the subject. Thankfully, there is one common thread that links most cult

theory: cult films have a relatively small, extremely devoted audience. Areas where definitions differ are *what* films to consider cult (is cult status limited to movies that have not found a wider audience or can we consider *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* cult franchises?) and critical reception (is cult status reserved for movies with poor or non-existent critical notices, and if so, what's the difference between a cult film and a *cause célèbre*?). The most thorough overview of the different constituents of a cult film in found in the introduction of *The Cult Film Reader*, a compendium of essays edited by Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik. They split the main constituents of cultdom into four categories: anatomy (the film-object itself), consumption (how the film was received by fans and critics alike), political economy (the socio-economic context in which the film was first released) and cultural status (the synchronic cultural context of the film). (Mathijs/Mendik 1) The conclusion to their editorial introduction is as follows:

> A cult film is a film with an active and lively communal following. Highly committed and rebellious in its appreciation, its audience regularly finds itself at odds with the prevailing cultural mores, displaying a preference for strange topics and allegorical themes that rub against cultural sensitivities and resist dominant politics. Cult films transgress common notions of good and bad taste, and they challenge genre conventions and coherent storytelling, often using intertextual references, gore, leaving loose ends or creating a sense of nostalgia. They frequently have troublesome production histories, coloured by accidents, failures, legends and mysteries that invoke their stars and directors, and in spite of often-limited accessibility, they have a continuous market value and a long standing public presence.

Though by no means the be-all and end-all list of characteristics that make up a cult film, Mathijs' and Mendik's definition provides us with a useful map when talking about a cult item in an online context. It is relatively easy to transpose the above notions from the rep house or basement to message boards and fan sites. But one important and pertinent question remains: can the films this essay is about be called cult films, and can their audiences be considered cult audiences even if there is a decentralization of viewership that seems to run against traditional cult viewership? In short, yes for *The Room* and no for *Snakes on a Plane*. But the crux of this essay is not to lay out each film's cult credentials; it is rather about each of these films exist relative to cultdom, and how online fandom either helped or hindered each film's half-life. It is also about the effect of bottom-up hype vs. top-down hype and how they each affect the movie they're hyping.

Further along, I will also be talking about Gérard Genette's concept of paratext, specifically about how the epitext affects the audience's reception of a given movie. I will talk briefly about trailers, styles of cutting them and how they fall into generic patterns, just like feature-length films do. There will also be a short portion on cinematic epitext as an extension of a film's given mythology, using the 1999 horror film *The Blair Witch Project* and its parent website as my main example. This chapter will further cover new practices for film promotion as enabled by the Internet, such as online-exclusive content, augmented reality games and viral marketing. I will compare the two case studies, plus *The Blair Witch Project*, regarding how their web presences informed not only the audience's viewing of the text, but how it skews notions of quality and/or intent.

In addition to talking about viral marketing, there will also be discussion of the *meme*, which was initially a term coined in the field of evolutionary biology by Richard

Dawkins to describe parts of the genome that get transferred from generation to generation, mostly to ensure that survival of a given species. In recent years, the term has been used on the Internet to describe a particular kind of joke, usually a variation on an image and/or catchphrase culled from a stock bank of same.

The most widespread of these memes are said to be *viral*, a term with its origins in medicine that has found its way into the social sciences, which itself became viral around the turn of the century with the release of Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell's central theme, that “ideas and products and messages spread like viruses do,” (7) is central to propagation theory on the Internet. There is, however, a distinction to be made between that which is memetic and that which is viral, one that mostly has to do with the longevity of the cultural object being transmitted and its lasting impact on the host, i.e. Internet users, consumers and fans. I will talk about this distinction in greater detail in the thesis' final chapter.

So why study a movie like *Snakes on a Plane* in this context, even though, as mentioned above, it has not achieved the level of cult film according to the metric used? The answer is simple: *Snakes on a Plane* did have a cult audience at one point, it just has the odd specification that it reached its zenith before the actual release of the film. The hype, mostly perpetuated by fans, created more fans by proxy. As far as this thesis is concerned, cult success is not as important as the creation of audiences through online means in a cult context. This is where the strange tale of *Snakes on a Plane* begins.

CASE STUDY #1: *SNAKES ON A PLANE*

What follows in the pages to come is a near-exhaustive chronicling of not only the life of *Snakes on a Plane* from pitch to product, but also of the fan activities that ran parallel to it, and how the two converged into a storm of hype that to many was indicative of the film's future success. But as we'll see further on, a number of factors actually hindered *Snakes on a Plane*'s road to cultdom, only to become a cautionary tale in Internet hype.

Snakes on a Plane is an American action film that was released in 2006. The earliest seeds of the film, however, stretch back to the 1990s. David Dalessandro, who currently serves as the Associate Vice Chancellor of University Development at the University of Pittsburgh, initially came up with the raw materials that would become *Snakes on a Plane.* In 1992, Dalessandro claims to have read an article about "Indonesian tree snakes climbing onto planes during World War II.[5]" This inspired him to write his first-ever screenplay (and to date, his only major screenplay). Over the next three years, Dalessandro would hone his script, which went from a modest creature-feature to a high-concept blockbuster-type film. In 1995, Dalessandro started shopping around his script, at that point called *Venom*, to major Hollywood studios. Of the thirty studios that were presented with *Venom*, none of them actually optioned the script.

In 1999, recalling the initial script and story idea, film producer Craig Berenson pitched a concept similar to Dalessandro's during an informal brainstorming session at DreamWorks[6]. Berenson's initial pitch was "take two of the biggest fears people have – fear of flying, fear of snakes – and throw them together at 30,000 feet and see what

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5 www.post-gazette.com/stories/ae/movies/snakes-on-a-plane-scares-up-a-following-based-on-hollywoods-frightful-track-record-446287/

6 www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1219727_2,00.html

happens.” Over the next couple of years, Berenson reworked the script with writer John Heffernan. This version of the script, whose working title was *Snakes on a Plane*, was initially to be optioned by MTV Films, but a deal was not concluded, presumably due to the events of 11 September 2001 and the reluctance associated with releasing a film where airborne terrorism is the main conceit.

After two years of streamlining and rewrites, *Snakes on a Plane* was finally picked up by its eventual distributor, New Line. Initially, Hong Kong-born director Ronny Yu was initially attached to direct the film, but as hinted in an interview with the *Oregonian's* Mike Russell, his vision of the film did not coincide with that of the producers’. In Yu's version of the film, the over-the-top aspects of the screenplay would have received much greater emphasis and the protagonist, who would end up being played by Samuel L. Jackson, would have died. Four months after being hired, Yu quit due to creative differences. Jackson, who had previously worked with Yu on *The 51st State*, had asked Yu to work on the project once he got wind of it. Though Yu left, Jackson stayed attached, famously stating that he accepted the project solely because of its title[7].

Ronny Yu was replaced by career stunt coordinator and second-unit director David R. Ellis. His previous directorial credits include *Homeward Bound II: Lost in San Francisco* (1996) and, more becoming of *Snakes on a Plane*, *Final Destination 2* (2003). Ellis, who had also worked as a second unit director on *Deep Blue Sea* and *Sphere*, was then no stranger to high-concept Hollywood films starring the uniquely charismatic Jackson. After some initial reservations, Ellis was on board. The script went through another rewrite phase, this time with input from both Ellis and Jackson. Principal photography for the film started on 13 June 2005 in Vancouver, BC. At this point in time,

[7] www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1186739,00.html

the film's working title was changed from *Snakes on a Plane* to *Pacific Air 121*, out of fear that the original title gave too much of the plot away. Dissatisfied with the move, Jackson began referring to the film under its original title during a press tour for *The Man*, another 2006 film he starred in. New Line would eventually reverse its decision, officially calling the film *Snakes on a Plane* once and for all.

On 14 August 2005, Collider.com posted a brief exclusive interview with Samuel L. Jackson about the *Snakes on a Plane* naming saga[8]. In it, he confirms that the film will be released as *Snakes on a Plane* and that the main deciding factor for his involvement in the project was its lean, high-concept title. Upon reading this news a few days later, screenwriter Josh Friedman, who was initially commissioned to perform rewrites on the script, uploaded an entry to his blog commending the decision to keep the original title[9][10]. Friedman's blog post went on to go viral, amassing over 200 comments and countless linkups. This would prove to be Ground Zero for the Internet's interest in *Snakes on a Plane* over the course of the next year. Many content creators, especially on YouTube, were inspired by the film's high-concept premise and presumably jokey tone to make their own fan homages to the film (in spite of the fact that the film didn't even have so much as a trailer out).

One of the first high-profile instances of the viral nature of *Snakes on a Plane* was in the popular webcomic *Overcompensating*, written and drawn by Jeffrey Rowland.[11] On 21 September 2005, Rowland uploaded a three-panel comic to the website, titled “SNAKES ON A PLANE,” along with a short-form blog post. The comic consists of Samuel L. Jackson yelling through the fourth wall and Rowland's in-universe alter ego

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[8] www.collider.com/entertainment/news/archive_detail.asp?aid=599&tcid=1

[9] http://hucksblog.blogspot.ca/2005/08/snakes-on-motherfucking-plane.html

[10] The title would officially be reverted to *Snakes on a Plane* on 2 March 2006.

[11] www.overcompensating.com/posts/20050921.html

adding amusingly tautological commentary to Jackson's yelling. In the accompanying blog post, Rowland half-jokes that "after the blessed euthanization of the Star Wars movies, [he] was beginning to believe there were no more pictures deserving of such undeserved anticipation. *Snakes on a Plane* has changed all that." Rowland went as far as to create a t-shirt design, christened "Snakes Flying a Plane," that was made available from the comic's flagship store, Topatco. He also noted that the premise of the film was "awesinine," a portmanteau of "awesome" and "asinine," which can be seen as an analogue to the "so bad it's good" phenomenon that fuels a good part of cult fandom. This notion of the brilliantly preposterous seems to have been the main impetus for the film's viral take-off.

Among the more popular *Snakes on a Plane*-related videos was "Snakes on a Plane: Rough Cut," uploaded by YouTube user czaplin on 7 March 2006[12]. With the help of no-budget sets, crude costumes and a cardboard cut-out of Samuel L. Jackson circa the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, James Denning and Gary Rolin perform a tongue-in-cheek version of what they imagine the script to be. The tone is enthusiastic and irreverent, filled with knowingly lame gags delivered with gleeful abandon. To date, it has reached nearly 200,000 views. Curiously, videos of this style can be seen as a precursor to another viral phenomenon called sweding, which would come to prominence in late 2007/early 2008 with the release of *Be Kind Rewind* (Michel Gondry, 2008). In sweded videos, which are usually recreations of trailers or condensed retellings of whole films, creators make up sets and props with household items and shoot and edit their videos on consumer-grade cameras.

The most popular YouTube video associated with the *Snakes on a Plane* pre-release Internet buzz was uploaded on 10 April 2006 by YouTube user cry4peace13, also

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[12] www.youtube.com/watch?v=8XP-spwjIrA

known as Dave Coyne. The video, simply titled "snakes on a plane" [sic], consists of Coyne performing celebrity impressions and imagining what it would be like if they auditioned for *Snakes on a Plane*[13]. Coyne channels Christopher Walken, Jack Nicholson, Joe Pesci, Robert DeNiro and, bizarrely, Beaker from *The Muppets*. The impressions themselves are mostly accurate and the lines spoken are your garden-variety stand-up comedy platitudes that usually accompany "what if X did Y"-style impressions. Beyond its 300,000-plus views, this video is notable because it is largely responsible for what is arguably the film's most famous line, "I have had it with these motherfucking snakes on this motherfucking plane." It should be noted that in the video, Coyne's Christopher Walken simply says "Get these motherfucking snakes off this motherfucking plane." The video, in addition to New Line finally cementing the film's title to *Snakes on a Plane*, led to a spike in interest in the film[14].

Many themed blogs sprang up in early 2006 thanks to this increased interest, which was now slated for a September release. The most prominent of which is the now-defunct Snakes on a Blog, created in January 2006 by Brian Finklestein[15]. The purpose of the blog was two-fold: (a) to chronicle the increasing online activity of the growing *Snakes on a Plane* fandom and (b) to get on the red carpet at the film premiere in September of that year. Between the time the site went live (12 January 2006) and the last post on the site (7 May 2008), Snakes on a Blog logged 637 distinct instances of original fan activity and media references to *Snakes on a Plane*[16]. 402 of these logs are classified under a rubric called "Snakes on the Net," which is further subdivided into nine different categories. The

13 www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUgl_8fI-XQ
14 www.google.com/trends/explore#q=snakes%20on%20a%20plane&date=7%2F2005%2018m&cmpt=q
15 This blog is not to be confused with the similarly-named and similarly-themed Snakes on a Blog, which was hosted on Blogspot.
16 The website no longer exists, but is accessible through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine.

biggest of these subcategories is the “fan graphics,” coming in at 102 entries. In this case, “graphics” appear to be a rather large umbrella term, since it houses not only posters, photo-manipulations and comics, but Halloween costumes, Jack-o-lanterns, graffiti and food. In fact, Snakes on a Blog managed to post 35 “dump posts” over the course of its existence, each one containing approximately 20-30 pieces of fan art each. They vary wildly in terms of overall aesthetic quality, but they all share the common bond of enthusiasm with the film, or at the very least the idea of the film and the community surrounding it. Interestingly, submissions to this particular category essentially screeched to a halt after the film premiered, suggesting that *Snakes on a Plane*'s cult status peaked early, and might consequently explain its relatively lousy box-office performance (which will be covered in greater detail later).

The “fan videos” section of the website was the second most popular fan art subdivision, clocking in at 83 posts. The earliest video-related entry, posted in 14 January 2006, catalogued three songs and a fan trailer. The Denning/Rolling “rough cut” short was featured on 2 March 2006, while Dave Coyne's impressions video was featured on 27 March 2006. True to the inherent multimedia nature of Internet-based art, the videos in this section are not simply limited to trailers and sketches. One of the early videos archived by Snakes on a Blog was one uploaded by YouTube user dedwolfbones, titled “Blackbird (Blacksnake).”[17] The video consists of two young men performing a *Snakes on a Plane*-inspired parody of the Beatles' “Blackbird.” In that same post, and attesting to the film's particular place in pop-culture space-time, Finklestein posted a video called “Lazy Sunday U.K. (We Drink Tea)”[18] a parody/homage to the *Saturday Night Live* digital short

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17 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1YgLslNSek
18 http://www.sambaron/1/hello-world

"Lazy Sunday"[19] that mentions *Snakes on a Plane*. The video was created by Cambridge residents Sam Baron and Raph von Blumenthal and has to date garnered 600,000 views on YouTube alone.

In the end, Finklestein's chronicling of the *Snakes on a Plane* phenomenon in all its iterations ultimately paid off. On 4 August 2006, Finklestein received an e-mail from Gordon Paddison, at the time the executive vice president of new media marketing at New Line Cinema, the film's distributor. Paddison was responsible for overlooking "the studio's digital media buying, business development, and cross division integrated marketing"[20], which by the sounds of it would cover the scouting and harnessing of web sites like Finklestein's to generate further interest in the film. In fact, Paddison is proud enough of the his overseeing of the grassroots *Snakes on a Plane* fan campaign that he lists it in his bio on the website of his new venture, Stradella Road. On 7 August 2006, Finklestein posted the e-mail he received from Paddison in its entirety. As chronicled in a short documentary included in the *Snakes on a Plane* DVD (which was, confusingly enough, also called *Snakes on a Blog*), Finklestein attended the film's American premiere at Mann's Chinese Theatre in Los Angeles, California on 18 August 2006.

In the grand tradition of music/movie tie-ins, *Snakes on a Plane*'s soundtrack was released on 15 August 2006, a full three days before the film's release. The album's first track and only single release was called "Snakes on a Plane (Bring It)," performed by New York dance-pop band Cobra Starship and featuring the talents of William Beckett of The Academy Is..., Travis McCoy of Gym Class Heroes and Maja Iverson of the Sounds. The single charted at #32 on Billboard's U.S. Alternative Songs chart, while its parent album

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[19] The song, written by comedy troupe the Lonely Island and comedian Chris Parnell, was initially released 17 December 2005. It would later appear on the Lonely Island's 2009 debut album, *Incredibad*.

[20] http://www.stradellaroad.com/who-we-are/

did not chart at all. Further cementing the film's status as an online phenomenon, the deluxe version of the soundtrack features some of the better fan songs, while the music video paid fan service to Jeffrey Rowland's participation in the fandom by featuring his *Snakes on a Plane* t-shirt design.

The same day, the Asylum, a Burbank, California-based production studio specializing in ultra-low budget knockoffs of popular franchises (or "mockbusters"), released a straight-to-DVD film called *Snakes on a Train*. The film was helmed by in-house director Peter Mervis, using the pseudonym "the Mallachi Brothers" and starred a gallery of unknown actors and actresses. Much like the vast majority of the Asylum's output, *Snakes on a Train* is the last great exponent of American exploitation film: not only does it shamelessly piggy-pack on the success of other films and use miniscule budgets, but they also ratchet up the sex, violence and gore when compared to their mainstream counterparts. It was in this spirit that New Line decided to round up the crew one more time for five days of reshoots to push the film from a PG-13 film to an R. The production company finally caught on, albeit perhaps a bit too late, that the film's fan base wasn't necessarily expecting a tight, taut action film. It dawned on the powers-that-be at New Line that what the fan base was clamouring for was for a wild action film that would exploitative, over-the-top and in tune with its own silliness.

Armed with new, more violent footage and a burgeoning fan community, *Snakes on a Plane* finally premiered in the United States on 18 August 2006. The film was a modest success: it grossed $13.8 million during its opening weekend, edging out the third-week run of the Will Ferrell comedy *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (Adam McKay, 2006) by $50,000 to take top spot. *Snakes on a Plane* also finished a cushy $3.8 million ahead of the nearest opening-weekend rival, *Accepted* (Steve Pink, 2006). It would

hold steady in the top two for the next week, before falling to 8th place during its third week ($8.4 million gross) and out of the top 10 altogether during its 4th week ($3.6 million gross). The film would stay in American movie theatres for twelve weeks, amassing a total domestic gross of $34,020,814, covering its production budget by approximately one million dollars[21].

In terms of pure numbers, the film was a modest success; if anything, it broke even. New Line, hoping for more bang for their buck, chalked *Snakes on a Plane* up as a loss. David Tuckerman, then New Line's president of theatrical distribution, stated that “there were a lot of inflated expectations on this picture, with the Internet buzz. But it basically performed like a normal horror movie.”[22] It would seem that in the minds of those in power at New Line, the added online buzz, coupled with the relatively active fan community, would translate to a better-than-average showing for that kind of film during that time of the year. But in spite of taking the community's advice to heart and more or less milking all the free advertisement for all it was worth, it turned out that *Snakes on a Plane* was a victim of its own hype. Everyone who wanted to see the film did so during the opening weekend, as shown by the significant second-week attendance drop-off mentioned above. In addition to its domestic gross, *Snakes on a Plane* also pulled in approximately $28 million dollars in international grosses, putting its worldwide box office total north of $60 million, which is ultimately quite respectable for a second-string genre picture.

On 2 January 2007, *Snakes on a Plane* was released on DVD through New Line's home video division. In a situation that is relatively common for modestly-successful genre films and even outright flops, the first-week DVD sales of the film eclipsed the

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21 http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?main&id=snakesonaplane.htm
22 http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/21/movies/21box.html?ref=arts&_r=0

movie's opening weekend gross, selling 903,648 units and pulling in $15.3 million[23]. To date, the film has sold over 1.3 million units. To put that in perspective, if *Snakes on a Plane* would have been released in 2011 with the same amount of unit sales, it would have ranked 35th, just below *Rango* (Gore Verbinski, 2011). For comparison, *Rango* was received much more warmly by critics and, if adjusted for inflation, ended up with three times its domestic box office returns.

From this, we can deduce that a higher percentage than usual of the people who saw the film early in its theatrical run also bought the film once it came out, likely for the same reasons they saw the film in the first place. Over the years, it hasn't achieved the cult status that it seemed destined to have with all of the online buzz and grassroots enthusiasm. But as *Snakes on a Plane*'s lukewarm overall performance can attest to, fervent Internet fandom does not a successful movie make. Plus, if the bulk of a film's fan activity happens before the premiere and fizzes out afterwards, its status as a cult film (or even a camp totem) can easily be compromised.

What it does show, however, is that a film's cult status is mutable, that something that can be called a cult film at one point in time will not necessarily have that title forever. In the case of *Snakes on a Plane*, its rabid fan base was composed of pre-fans, since they were at their most vocal and active *before* the film's actual release. Its life (and subsequent death) as a cult item is the mirror image of that of the second film discussed in this project, *The Room*.

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[23] http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/2006/SNAKP-DVD.php

CASE STUDY #2: *THE ROOM*

As with *Snakes on a Plane*, the pages that follow will chart the birth, life and half-life of *The Room* in as complete way as possible, while giving priority to how the fanbase first came to fruition and how it was later maintained.

The Room is an American drama film released in 2003. Writer/director/producer/star Tommy Wiseau, whose "background is theater,[24]" initially conceived the film as a play. Initial plans for a live theatre run were scrapped when Wiseau concluded that more people would be willing to see the film version of a story rather than the play version of that same story. But before the script for the eventual film was even started, Wiseau tried to adapt *The Room* into a novel. By Wiseau's own count, the manuscript for the novelization of *The Room* is over 500 pages long. As of the time of writing, the book is still unpublished.

Wiseau wished to make the film version of *The Room* as independently as possible. No major studios or distributors were involved at any point in the production or distribution of the film. The film was released on Wiseau's dime and distributed by Wiseau's own company, Wiseau Films. The only listed producers are Wiseau (both as "producer" and "executive producer"), actor Greg Sestero (who plays Mark in the film), casting directors Drew Caffrey and Chloe Lietzke, and video artist Justin Silverman (who served as "consulting producer"). All in all, $6 million was raised to make the film, which is an astonishingly high amount for a completely independent production. To this day, Wiseau remains very secretive about how the bulk of the sum was raised, but has hinted that part of the money was raised by importing leather jackets from Korea[25]. In a 2007

24 http://www.portlandmercury.com/portland/interview-with-tommy-wiseau/content?oid=1573119

25 http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20246031,00.html

interview with the LAist, Wiseau, somewhat ominously, stated that he has "certain resources. Some people do, some people don't.[26]"

Such strange declarations and actions would be par for the course during casting and principal photography. Wiseau himself appears to be unreliable source, because so much of what he claims either doesn't hold water when scrutinized or is contradicted by multiple other people who worked on the film. For example, Wiseau claims that during the casting process, he had 5000 head shots to choose from. In reality, of the named cast in the film, only four have previous feature film credits to their name, and three of those films are unknown budget-level productions.[27] There are also numerous reports, many of them corroborated by members of both cast and crew, testifying to Wiseau's fractured, erratic directing style. Says actor Dan Janjigian, who played drug dealer Chris-R: "You could come in and it would be a completely different cast and crew. It was crazy." (Collis)

It should be noted, however, that Wiseau cast multiple people for the same part as "backups." Says Wiseau: "We actually have three Lisas and four Lisas, and the fact is that people did not perform the way I want it. So we let her go, some of these people, and she (Juliette Danielle) did a better job." Wiseau's eccentric film-making style extended to the use of apparatus itself: apparently unsure of the difference between shooting on film and shooting digitally, Wiseau decided to shoot *The Room* in both formats simultaneously, to no noticeable effect on the final product. The image lacks both the texture associated with 35 mm film or the full sharpness typical of digital productions. This is just one of the many ways that Wiseau either misused or flat-out squandered his relatively hefty 6 million $USD budget.

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[26] www.laist.com/2007/04/27/laist_interviews_tommy_wiseau_the_face_behind_the_billboard.php

[27] Greg Sestero was an uncredited extra in *Patch Adams* and *Edtv;* Robyn Paris ("Michelle") had a bit part in little-seen comedy *Present Perfect*; Mike Holmes ("Mike") was an extra in another little-seen film, *Bill's Gun Shop*; Kyle Vogt ("Peter") had a bit part in a bizarre cheapie sequel to *Romeo and Juliet.*

Before its release, the film's main source of promotion was a large billboard in Hollywood, California near the corner of Highland Avenue and Fountain Street. The billboard's rightmost third was occupied by a close up of Wiseau's face, his left eye seemingly affected with ptosis. The now-famous typographical logo of the film with drop shadow takes up the top half of what's left of the billboard. The bottom half is dedicated to the film's credits. Sandwiched between the two is a link to the film's official website, which is to this day still active, mostly as a hub through which to buy *Room*-related merchandise and to announce screenings of the film. The billboard, erected in 2003, would stay up until the fall of 2008.

The film's official website[28] has barely changed since its earliest available incarnation (9 August 2003[29]): black background and film credits, plus an array of links. Over time, links to merchandise and events have been added to the front page with ill-regard for typographical consistency or legibility. In fact, much of the text is rendered in black, making it unreadable thanks to the background. In addition, the webmaster (presumably Wiseau himself) doesn't delete everything from the pages. Even now, notices for screenings held eight years ago are still listed on the “Screenings” page. The overall aesthetic feel of the website can generously be called garish: a haphazard collision of bizarre colour combinations and cheesy 1990s style plain HTML. The cast's bios read as if they were written by Wiseau himself. The site doesn't appear to have proofread at any point in the recent past. Beyond this, *The Room*'s ad campaign was scant, limited to local newspapers and television.

The Room had its world premiere at Laemmle Theatres Fallbrook in Los Angeles, California on 27 June 2003. Wiseau, wishing to give his independent production the allure

28 http://www.theroommovie.com
29 http://web.archive.org/web/20030809084917/http://www.theroommovie.com/

of a big Hollywood premiere, hired a limousine, rented a spotlight and paved the theatre's entrance with red carpeting. Wiseau, recycling old tricks from exploitation-film hucksters, offered copies of the film's soundtrack to everyone who bought a ticket. According to one reviewer, commemorative books were also available. (Foundas) According to the cast members, the theatre was near-capacity. By all accounts, even at that first screening, people were rolling in the aisles. *The Room* was more or less laughed out of the multiplex after a two-week, two-screen run, grossing a mere 1,900$US, or 0.00032% of its budget.

Unsurprisingly, the film was not previously screened for critics, and only one critic of note seems to have attended those first screenings and live to write about it. Scott Foundas, then writing for *Variety*, gave *The Room* a short but scathing review, comparing it unfavourably to Vincent Gallo's notorious *The Brown Bunny* (2003). Foundas goes on to say, in a slight bit of unnecessary ad hominem, that the film's “primary goal, apparently, is to convince us that the freakish Wiseau is actually a normal, everyday sort of guy.” (Foundas)

Towards the end of *The Room*'s brief initial theatrical run, the film caught the attention of a young screenwriter named Michael Rousselet, a member of the Los Angeles-based 5secondfilms collective. Sitting in an empty theatre, Rousselet marvelled at how bad the film was. This first solo screening was, according to him, akin to an episode of *Mystery Science Theatre 3000*, complete with jokes and quips being yelled at the screen while the film was being shown. When the end credits started rolling, Rousselet called up a few of his friends, imploring them to see the film. Says Rousselet: “We (he and his friends) saw it four times in three days, and on the last day I had over 100 people there.” (Collis) Of those hundred, several of them were surely among those who e-mailed Tommy Wiseau over the course of the next year or so, which encouraged him to start monthly

midnight screenings of the film. In fact, Rousselet's biography on 5secondfilms' website states, cheekily but not inaccurately, "In 2003 Michael saw a movie called The Room [sic], he became manically obsessed with it and told way too many people. He's very sorry for the damage he has done to cinema and is trying hard to rectify it[30]."

Sensing an enthusiastic response to his film, Wiseau did indeed rent out a room at a theatre for monthly showing of the film in Los Angeles. The first of these screenings were held on 10 January 2004 at the Wilshire Screening Room in Beverly Hills[31]. These afternoon and evening screenings would go on until June, when Wiseau booked Laemmle's Sunset 5 theatre for a special dual anniversary screening of *The Room*. After a brief period of silence in L.A., *The Room* began its fabled midnight run at the Sunset 5 on 18 December 2004[32]. The film would go on to play once a month, traditionally on the last Saturday, until Laemmle closed up shop at that particular branch on 29 November 2011[33]. The film wound up playing once a month every month for nearly seven straight years. The film resumed its once-monthly schedule at the Regent Theatre in Westwood on 10 December 2011[34], where it still plays to this day. Serendipitously, it currently runs in parallel to its closest spiritual brethren, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The film's longevity of the box office was not (and continues not to be) affected by the film's availability on DVD. Wiseau Films released the DVD on 17 December 2005.

Los Angeles being what it is, the word of *The Room* started making the rounds among the writers and performers who populate the city. Keeping in mind that the billboard on Highland Avenue was a minor attraction/eyesore in the city, it was just a

30 http://5secondfilms/about/mrousselet
31 http://www.theroommovie.com/screeningspop.html
32 http://www.laemmle.com/filmrundatehistory.php?mid=370
33 http://www.laemmle.com/viewtheatre.php?thid=2
34 See 33.

matter of time before someone relatively well-known got around to seeing the film. In Clark Collins' truly indispensable 2008 article "The Crazy Cult of 'The Room,'" one small corner of the entertainment world started getting enamoured with *The Room* in 2006. That May, *Day to Day*, a show broadcast on National Public Radio (NPR), aired a segment on *The Room*, its fans and its eccentric creator, Tommy Wiseau. (Patel) This was the first time that the phenomenon of *The Room* was brought to national attention. This was also the beginning of end of *The Room* as a strictly Los Angeles-based phenomenon. Even this early in the film's life in the national consciousness, Wiseau was (a) being secretive about the origins of his abnormally large independently-sourced budget and (b) treating the film as if the comedic badness of it was intentional from the get-go. Says fan John Dalton: "He meant it to be a Edward Albee/Tennessee Williams type thing, and it is all those things, but done horribly." (Patel)

As a testament to *The Room*'s enduring popularity as a midnight-movie institution, the A.V. Club, the venerable arts-and-entertainment branch of satirical newspaper *The Onion*, published "A Viewer's Guide to *The Room*." In the article, a group of fans collectively credited as House of Qwesi[35] lay out some of the practices that are common at screenings of the film. These include throwing spoons at the screen when spoons appear in the film, yelling "focus!" when the image gets blurry and cheering during tracking shots of the Golden Gate Bridge[36]. The final paragraph of the article, amusingly called "Vices One Could Indulge In If One Were So Inclined," suggests several alcoholic beverages one could drink while watching the film. This appears to follow a long, decades-old tradition of cult film viewership and booze (see: martinis and *Casablanca*, White Russians and *The*

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[35] In a subsequent A.V. Club article, writer Scott Tobias revealed that House of Qwesi was the *nom de plume* of a group of fans led by Jon Danforth-Appell, an L.A.-based writer and social media expert.

[36] It's a testament to *The Room*'s intrinsic oddness that each of these things happens in the film often enough to warrant feature-length call-and-response games.

Big Lebowski, Pabst Blue Ribbon and *Blue Velvet*).

Such “primers” and “viewer's guides” have sprung up in a few other places in the wake of *The Room*'s success. One such primer was written for IFC's official website by film critic Matt Singer. In contrast to House of Qwesi's guide, which is aimed at people who anticipate going to a screening of the film, Singer's guide seems tailored for the home viewer who's going in cold. Instead of diegetic cues for actions to be done *en masse* in a live setting, Singer simply points out errors and incongruities in the plot. It's as if Singer wants to assure viewers that yes, some of these events don't make sense and yes, the performances are not that great, you just have to roll with it.

During his appraisal of the film's infamous “you're tearing me apart” scene, Singer quotes author Jack Stevenson's B-movie memoir *Land of a Thousand Balconies* with regard to *The Room*'s appeal. In the book, Stevenson notes that “passionate intent” is the common thread that runs through all great pieces of camp (which *The Room* most certainly is). Stevenson goes on to say that all great camp films are “the product of pure passion, on whatever grand or pathetic scale, somehow gone strangely awry” and that “pure camp is created against all odds by the naive, stubborn director who in the cynical, hardball, bottom line movie business can still foolishly dream he is creating a masterpiece without money, technical sophistication or (orthodox) talent.” (Singer) The first part of the quote, if the tales from the cast are to be believed, is clearly in line with a passion project gone awry. The second part of that quote fits Wiseau the creator to a T, that is if we ignore the fact that *The Room* cost $6 million to make (though, as mentioned several times previous, this film looks like it was made for a fraction of that cost).

Further pop-analysis of *The Room* through a camp lens was done about a month after Singer published his mostly tongue-in-cheek guide. On 26 March 2009, Scott Tobias

wrote an entry welcoming *The Room* into what the A.V. Club called the New Cult Canon. The article, while not shying away from jokes, is much more even-handed in its assessment of the film, contextualizing *The Room* in the post-midnight movie era and calling it "the first true successor to the *Rocky Horror* throne." (Tobias) Zeroing in on what *The Room*'s particular appeal might be, Tobias echoes Stevenson's notions of perceived passion and naiveté of the main creative force behind the vehicle. In this respect, Tobias compared *The Room* favourably (relatively speaking) to the works of Ed Wood, with *Glen or Glenda?* being singled out as a point of comparison. From his article: "Both [films] are personal and shockingly amateurish laughers that put their directors in front of the camera and are all too revealing of their odd peccadilloes. Wood has a thing for angora sweaters; Wiseau has a thing for pillow fights, red roses and the Golden Gate Bridge." Tobias concludes his article by stating that *The Room* is "stranger and more revealing than a mere stinker" and is "as unvarnished and florid as an adolescent's diary." (Tobias)

Incidentally, given *The Room*'s campy appeal and cult success, ringleader Wiseau found himself in the position of being in demand, not so much for his talents as a writer, director or actor, but as a visual punch line, a found object-style sort of comic shorthand. His first major extra-*Room*[37] credit is an appearance on the off-kilter Cartoon Network sketch comedy show *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* He appears in season 4 episode called, appropriately enough, "Tommy." In the episode, Tim Heidecker and Eric Wareheim hire Wiseau to direct a sketch for the show called "Pig Man." Given the show's particular aesthetic (a mix of kitschy public-access TV, creepy surrealism and pop absurdity), the casting and 'hiring' of Wiseau walks a very fine line between enlightened

[37] This excludes the low-budget independent documentary short *Homeless in America*.

stunt casting and cruel joke, especially since it's not exactly clear whether or not Wiseau is in on it. It's the kind of post-modern, irony-heavy gag that Heidecker and Wareheim excel at, but also the kind that breeds fascination with Wiseau-as-art-object.

This trend would continue with *The House That Drips Blood on Alex*, an amusing horror-comedy short with Wiseau in the titular role as Alex. As with *The Room*, Wiseau barely abides by what we could call standard codes of performance. Whereas the rest of the cast performs admirable and, for lack of a better term, normally, Wiseau flails, slurs, mispronounces and over-emotes. Curiously, when re-contextualized into something that clearly isn't his own passion project, Wiseau's peculiar brand of hamming falls perfectly in line with the sub-par acting found in many classic exploitation films. Only Wiseau is the odd man out: everything else about the production is quality. As was the case with *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, Wiseau is clearly stunt-cast, chosen specifically because of his shortcomings as a performer. The script of and edits in *The House That Drips Blood on Alex* evidently play to Wiseau's known shortcomings, like his ill grasp of idiomatic English (just listen to the way he delivers the line “Home sweet house.”). Again, Wiseau appears to be the conduit of some kind of post-modern joke, and it is unclear whether or not he is fully aware of his status in the world of film.

Further cementing his status as a symbol of Internet-era post-kitsch, Wiseau starred in two recurring video series' on YouTube. One of them, called *Tommy Explains It All*, is basically an advice column where Wiseau answers questions sent in by viewers. The other one, called *The Tommy Wi-Show*, is produced by Machinima.com. The show is done in the “let's play” style of online videos, where a person (in this case Wiseau) is filmed while playing a video game and commenting on the process. These series further blur the lines between Wiseau the artist and Wiseau the man, creating a post-ironic cult of personality

that is still active today. Wiseau is still busy touring *The Room* in the US and abroad, shopping around both the original book version of *The Room* and a sitcom pilot called *The Neighbors*[38], the website for which has been (a) under construction since 2007 and (b) is just as amateurish and ugly as the website for *The Room* is. Let it not be said that Wiseau is anything but consistent.

[38] http://www.theneighborssitcom.com

POINT OF INTEREST #1: FANS, HUBS AND INITIAL MARKETING STRATEGIES

In many ways, the two films discussed in the previous chapters bear many similarities to one another. In the broadest sense, they were both critical and commercial failures that gained an audience in spite of themselves. But this is where the easy similarities end. As previously mentioned, *The Room*'s failure has made it into a cult darling. To this day, monthly screenings of the film are still being held in Los Angeles, while other non-regular screenings are happening throughout North America and Europe. The films still steadily sells on DVD, both trough the film's official website and online retailers like Amazon. For its part, *Snakes on a Plane*, while it had a relatively impressive grassroots fan base of its own during its pre-release buzz, this fan base more or less deteriorated after the film was released (as evidence by the noticeable drop-off in attendance after the first week of wide release). Interest in the film perked up again when the DVD was released, but with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the level of *Snakes on a Plane* fan activity died quickly, while *The Room*'s fan base is still vibrant nearly ten years on.

This can be partially explained by each film's marketing strategy. One of the choices that the marketing team at New Line adopted was drawing attention to *Snakes On a Plane*'s self-styled cult appeal. But, in proclaiming its own membership into brotherhood of Cult Films, *Snakes on a Plane*'s ad campaign might have done more harm than good. Say Mathijs and Sexton: “The very term 'cult' is finding increased application in marketing because of the rising awareness that it might lead to some revenue. Yet there is still some apprehension among publicists to plainly self-identity a product as 'cult.'” (Mathijs/Sexton 30) Mathijs and Sexton go on to single out *Snakes on a Plane* as an example of a film

whose success was hindered in part because it “trumpeted its own 'cultishness.'” (Mathijs/Sexton 30) This falls perfectly in line with the assertion that cult status cannot be top down or generated by a public relations firm, but thrives rather as a phenomenon that happens in spite of the work and the industry that made it.

It stands to reason, then, that *The Room* became an attractive proposition cult-wise *because* it was conceived and marketed as a regular independent film. In a way, *The Room*'s ultra-modest marketing campaign, which consisted mostly of a handful of ads in trade papers, a web site and a strange, massive billboard, was a lot closer to a traditional, pre-mass media promotional campaign. This is one of the striking differences between the main promotional branch of these two releases: *Snakes on a Plane* was going to be playing on a national stage but had the pretensions of a sloppy road-showed B film, while *The Room*, by accident or design, whether great or not, was destined to be a Los Angeles-only phenomenon because of budget constraints (it's worth noting again that it took the better part of three years for word of *The Room*'s legendary ineptitude to be known widely outside of Orange County).

Obviously, the Internet has a say in the way both of these films were promoted, but not exactly in the same way as, say, *The Blair Witch Project*, which provided visitors with what amounts to the HTML equivalent of the Special Features section of a DVD, among other things (I will cover the impact of the *Blair Witch Project*'s website in a subsequent chapter). In contrast to this, both *Snakes on a Plane*'s and *The Room*'s online presences were mostly decentralized from their official websites, nor did said sites act as portals for their respective burgeoning fan bases. Most of the activity on the film was decentralized, mostly happening on a loose, disconnected affiliation of fan sites and blogs. This essay will take a closer look on how each of the film's enthusiasts used to Internet to exhibit

their fandom in a later chapter. For now, we will keep focusing on marketing strategies.

As mentioned, part of the reason for the relatively lukewarm response that *Snakes on a Plane* initially received was because of its appropriation of the title of "cult film." Now, as mentioned here and summarized neatly by Mathijs and Mendik in *The Cult Film Reader*, defining a cult film is more or less a fool's errand. There are as many different definitions of the term as there are people writing about it. But at the risk of oversimplifying a complex and nuanced term, the most succinct way I can characterize them are beloved failures and outliers, orphaned from the rest of the respectable pack for being too much of something (too weird, too bad, too gross, too oblique, too sexual, etc.). The key word here is "beloved." These films must have their clever defenders and vocal champions. It's what separates a movie that no one knows about from a movie everyone *should* know about.

If we accept this definition of a cult film as is, we can easily see why proclaiming one's own cultishness, especially before the film has been seen, is rather foolish. Cult status is closely related to how a film is received by audiences. There is no way to assess a film's "cultishness" without it being out there in the wild to be seen. The one argument that can be made against calling a film's cult status before release is that traditionally speaking, films with troubled or otherwise momentous production cycles were occasionally singled out for cult status (like, say, *Casablanca*).[39] If we consider the two films being discussed in this essay in this context, neither film qualifies out of the gate on the strength of its tumultuous principal photography. Sure, a few of the previously-mentioned articles point to some studio meddling on the set of *Snakes on a Plane* and

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Obviously there are other contributing factors to these films being cult (*Casablanca*'s regular screenings at Harvard's Brattle Theatre, for example).

Tommy Wiseau's flights of delirium on the set of *The Room*, but neither is really relevant here. *Snakes on a Plane* was a major production, so studio involvement was to be expected, while *The Room* was so off the radar no one would have picked up on the eccentricities of its principal photography until after its release.

The crux of this argument is that generally speaking, calling attention to your own cult status before said status has been established or even hinted at is, from a marketing standpoint, a bad idea. It's usually inaccurate and, when used extensively, distorts the concept which seems best used to name a phenomena generated by film viewers. But it is possible to market something like *Snakes on a Plane* as a goofy, fun exercise in genre silliness. This can be done through pastiche and hyperbole, like the classically-styled exploitation trailers of *Grindhouse* (Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, 2007) and *Hobo with a Shotgun* (Jason Eisener, 2011), or through the self-consciously over-the-top trailers like that for unpretentious stunt-cast shoot-'em-up *The Expendables* (Sylvester Stallone, 2010) or practically any film starring Jason Statham. Notice that the vast majority of these trailers rely on three key points: kinetic action, goofy one-liners and an overall lightness of tone.

The trailer for *Snakes on a Plane* might have been the first major mistake made by New Line in the marketing of this particular film. Judging by early fan response to the film's concept, and even interviews with the cast and crew themselves in Jeff Jensen's exhaustive *Entertainment Weekly* article[40], the film was conceived and mostly shot as an over-the-top, action-heavy exploitation film. The film, as released, ended up being a fairly standard action-thriller with just enough profanity, violence and nudity to secure an R rating. The trailer for the film, however, trades in the spooky atmospherics and rapid-fire

40 http://www.ew.com/ew/article/o,,1219727,00.html

editing that one usually associates with the modern horror film. The way the trailer is cut (long stretches of blank black screen, occasionally interrupted by quick shots of snakes) and scored (nearly every cut is punctuated with the sound of thunderclaps and lightning strikes) makes the story feel more horrifying and foreboding than it actually is. Couple that with a dissonant score reminiscent of Krzysztof Penderecki's pieces used in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) and you have something that feels like a trailer for a horror film.

This dissonance between the tone of the intended film, the tone of the actual film and the tone of the trailer for the film is a fairly standard occurrence in Hollywood. Lisa Kernan, as noted in her book *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, says that:

> "Trailers get away with numerous falsifications in the interest of promotion, just as other ads do, but because these advertisements are for a product that is a longer form of the same kind of cinematic text, a trailer's truth claims 'claim' different kinds of 'truth' about the films they promote than other ads do, thus potentially creating a range of responses in audiences that may vary from their responses to ordinary advertising rhetoric." (11)

Kernan also goes on to say that trailers, like films themselves, are usually bound by certain genre codes, saying that "trailers (along with other promotional discourse) have been instrumental in the formation and legitimating of Hollywood genres, steering our interests in a given film into established or emerging generic categorizations and heightening out interest in the genre as a whole, facilitating the film's positioning as a commodity." (Kernan 14) That said, the relatively wide difference between product as presented and the real deal has long been a criticism of advertising on the whole, and it is

no different when talking about film. As far as “trailer genre conventions” go, *Snakes on a Plane* was advertised as a horror/thriller right from the get-go. This may have contributed to its lukewarm box office performance.

The trailer for *The Room*, on the other hand, poses a new set of discussions to be had. Two cuts of the trailer exist[41]. Curiously, both were released well after the film's initial run and around the same time that the film was getting wider exposure. To quote Scott Tobias' *A.V. Club* article on the film: “In the years since *The Room* was made, [Tommy] Wiseau has pulled an 'I meant to do that' on its perceived shortcomings as a drama; 'Experience this quirky new black comedy, it's a riot!' screams the DVD cover. (Nice try, bud).” Curiously, these same seemingly tacked-on sentiments are also present in both available versions of the film's trailer. They are clearly cut to be trailers for a dramatic feature, complete with a love triangle, overflowing emotions and a score composed mostly of mournful strings. But as with *Snakes on a Plane*, trailer and film do not align, tonally speaking. Importantly, though, the timing and reasons for these “dissonant” trailers is very different from film to film. With *Snakes on a Plane*, it was an action/thriller that was essentially being promoted prior to release (as is the standard way of doing things) as a horror film under the notion that it would attract a wider audience. With *The Room*, the trailer was cut *after* the film was released, trying to mask its incompetence as drama by making it a black comedy, which incidentally, it doesn't work as either. In neither case did the trailer actually set out to do what it was supposed to.

Trailers go hand in hand with viewer anticipation, as Kernan outlined earlier. It builds up the expectations of the audience. With *Snakes on a Plane*, there were two different audiences to consider. There was the standard group of film-goers to court, those

[41] http://www.theroommovie.com/roomtrailer2.html

who would be convinced to see the film after seeing the trailer, and there was the built-in audience of online fans, the ones who produced fan art and parodies and who were mostly on board in the first place because of a goofy B-movie premise. In a way, *Snakes on a Plane*'s relatively weak performance at the box office could be partially explained by New Line wanting its cake and eating it too. It was trying to release a film that would have cult appeal *and* mass appeal simultaneously. It tried to please both insider *and* outsider. What's left is just a mediocre action film that was, as odd as it may sound, much more popular *before* it was released than after the fact.

There are no such illusions of the audience of *The Room*. First of all, the film has no pre-built fan base to begin with. It didn't have the overt B-movie origins, star power, online fan base or memetic charge that *Snakes on a Plane* had. It was intended as a serious dramatic feature, albeit a cripplingly flawed one. The appreciative audience that was attracted to the film's badness was an organic, bottom-up phenomenon, not unlike that of *Snakes on a Plane*. But *The Room* did not have the burden of fan expectation like *Snakes on a Plane* did. This may be part of the reason why *The Room* is still a beloved cult item to this day. It is its own hermetical oddity. It was created, promoted and screened inside its own little self-contained bubble. This is, in a nutshell, independent filmmaking. But since it was produced entirely outside of the current Hollywood system, the film wasn't shaped in any way by outside powers or interests. Which is fine, but it also hasn't been polished and honed into something like a normal movie. It's too eccentric, too bizarre, and too clumsily made. Even the trailers foreshadow its own overwrought badness. *The Room* has been more successful in maintaining an audience than *Snakes on a Plane* all these years because of a certain naiveté of purpose and execution. Fan response and activity with regard to these two films are nearly mirror images of each other.

As previously mentioned, both films had/have a strong online fan base. *Snakes on a Plane*, with its ludicrous set-up and amusingly blunt title, created a small cottage industry of videos, pictures, memes and other related fan art. The film seemingly was a big enough deal to warrant an *Entertainment Weekly* profile. It wasn't; the film was released, underperformed and faded from the public consciousness, only to spike up again briefly around the time of the film's home video release. *The Room*'s lifespan had been nearly the opposite: released to no fanfare, kept in theatres by the sheer willpower (and bankroll) of its director/writer/star, and slowly but surely gained a small following in L.A.'s comedy underground. From then on, the following gained steam, got big enough to profile in *Entertainment Weekly* and is now close to an international cult phenomenon. This following has been aided by, among other things, a successful home video release and a small cottage industry of videos, pictures, memes and other related fan art. Though these receptive arcs run in opposite directions, their presence and success are predicated upon the fan's interactions with each film's subject matter in creative ways.

At this juncture, it's important to point out how these particular kinds of fan activities diverge from the more traditional fan activities that have been primarily covered elsewhere. Fandom has always been a hub phenomenon: groups of enthusiasts of the same piece of culture have always congregated to where the action was, so to speak. In the pre-Internet days, occasions to get together with more than a few people who had the same kind of niche interest mostly included casual get-togethers, similar to book clubs. Conventions and other such events were (and, mind, are) occasions to engage with both a fandom's subject and object in an official capacity. It stood in contrast with what you could call “private fandom,” or a personal enjoyment of a text or texts in any number of ways, but devoid of that social element. The core difference between then and now is (a)

the ease with which these hubs can be created, though web sites, forums and social networks, and (b) the sheer number of hubs that can and do exist. To wit: if we plug a cultural object into a network and consider the so-called network effect[42], a given text will take an infinitesimally shorter amount of time to, as Jenkins puts it, “actualize.” The methods of networking have changed, but the results are more or less the same. Even though fan participation has grown to include much more of the private sphere in the home entertainment era, it is still the human element that decided if a text is worth their while, on in this case, someone else's.

In his seminal fan studies tome *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins dedicates a chapter to the process by which texts become “real” to fans. Obviously, Jenkins does not mean “real” in the sense that people usually mean it when talking about hardcore fans, i.e. belief in the delusional notion that the fictions they consume are somehow more than that. One of the great things about *Textual Poachers* as a whole is that it spends a good portion of its first chapter defusing the then- (and in many ways current) stereotype of “the fan” as an anti-social obsessive. Jenkins makes the case for fans to be seen as what most people see them as now: enthusiasts whose social inclinations exist on a continuum and aren't necessarily dependant on their likes and dislikes.

In the aforementioned chapter, Jenkins compares this “actualization of texts” with a passage from Margery Williams' classic children's tale *The Velveteen Rabbit*. In short, when asked by the titular rabbit whether the process of becoming Real is instantaneous or gradual, the character of Skin Horse answers that it's a gradual process, that's it's the end result of being “loved in,” so to speak. Or as Jenkins put it: “The boy's investment in the toy will give it a meaning that was unanticipated by the toymaker, a meaning that comes

[42] A term used in business and economics that basically stipulates that a good or service becomes more valuable or important as the number of people who use said good or service grows.

not from its intrinsic merits or economic value but rather from the significance the child bestows on the commodity through its use.” (Jenkins-b 50)

Further in that same chapter, Jenkins describes the effect that technology has had on fandom. Specifically, how home recording and playback devices made it much easier for someone to have easier access, and therefore interact with, one's favourite texts. In addition, this technology also enables what Jenkins refers to as “rereading,” or repeat viewing of the texts. (Jenkins 70) These re-watches aren't necessarily done based on the show's artistic merits (though that can certainly be the case), but to pick up on anything that the viewer might have not seen the first time. This can mean anything from whole episodes (one must consider that *Textual Poachers* was written in the post-VHS/pre-DVR days) to minute details akin to the “cinephiliac moments” referred to in the introduction.

Obviously, there is a link to be made with access and dissection. One simply cannot love (or at least love with as much vigour) what they do not have handy. With time, that process of acquiring has only become easier. Though the World Wide Web proper had been around since the early 1990s, it only became a consumer force to be reckoned with by the end of that same decade. In becoming more and more widespread, the Internet, among other things, enabled the fanning-out of fandom and fandom groups. People living continents apart could now actively participate in fan activities together. Message boards, instant messaging and file sharing have made it so that a neophyte can go from knowing next to nothing about the original *Star Trek* to knowing close to everything about the original *Star Trek* in a short time. An eager fan can even “marathon” the series' entire run (readily available in a number of formats) in less than two months[43], a luxury that wasn't

[43] If someone were to watch one episode of the original *Star Trek* per day, watching the whole series would take approximately 79 days. Assuming that same person watches an extra episode on weekends, it would take a little less than nine weeks to complete the whole run.

readily available in the pre-Internet/pre-DVD age unless you had video copies (bootleg or otherwise) of the show's run readily available. In a broad manner of speaking, in this respect, it takes “less” to be a fan of something nowadays; online retailers like Amazon stock almost every in-circulation DVD or BluRay in existence. People are selling off their VHS collections on eBay. Streaming services like Hulu and Netflix change a modest monthly fee for the use of their vast libraries. You can even rent movies from YouTube, the Apple App Store and Google's Play service for a few dollars. Almost everything that can be ripped and encoded is likely on one of the major torrenting hubs. The Internet has become the ultimate cultural one stop shop; you can find out everything you need to know about a work you didn't know even existed, and then acquire them in any way you see fit (with varying levels of legality). A movie's availability over time is related to the affordability of the format. Digital copies are cheaper than DVDs, which were cheaper than VHS. Affordability dictates availability. The more data you can store on a format, the likelier it is to ascend to power. We've gone from a couple of hours on a VHS to a few more hours on a single video disc, to several gigabytes on information on another kind of disc to as much information as a host's serve will allow for a small fee.

POINT OF INTEREST #2: THE CINEMATIC EPITEXT

It has been noted already that the earliest champions of *Snakes on a Plane* were attracted by the grindhouse bluntness and high-concept nature of the film's title. Armed with the smallest slivers of information, the nascent fan base started riffing on the film's strange title and premise. As such, people started taking pictures of snakes on other kinds of objects (anything from other modes of transportation, furniture and things that rhyme with “plane”) or making drawings of same. Videos and t-shirts were also created. What links all of these pieces of fan art is their ties to a certain kind of DIY fandom participation, whereby a fan or group of fans use whatever materials they have at hand to create a piece of tertiary work. Examples of this can be seen in all manner of fan activity, from zines to poster designs to fan fiction. What makes the fan material produced by the *Snakes on a Plane* fandom interesting is that the fans in question had comparatively little primary text to work with. Lots of fan art was produced when the only thing that was known about the film was its title. Although it is worth noting that, like with the enthusiastic support of the film itself, the production of fan art related to *Snakes on a Plane* tapered off quite rapidly after the film was initially released.

Curiously, *The Room* didn't nearly generate as much grass-roots fan-art per se once it started, or even once it started gaining a foothold in the Los Angeles underground. In this instance, fan engagement was first and foremost with the text itself, not with an imagined possible text, which was the case with *Snakes on a Plane*. One theory is that *The Room* as a concept, not just a film, was a perfect found-art object in and of itself, going right past ridiculousness and landing firmly into the realm of the Burkeian sublime[44]. It

[44] According to Edmund Burke, the *sublime* is whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror,” or in this case, something stilted and uncanny.

did inspire, among other things, a 16-bit video game, its own RiffTrax, a running gag on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim block, and even a tell-all novel from line producer/co-star Greg Sestero. But more than anything, there was a subtext for fans to latch onto, which is perhaps why *The Room* has withstood the test of time while comparatively few people remember *Snakes on a Plane*. The important subtextual element that helped *The Room* was Tommy Wiseau himself, his delusions of grandeur, his ill-executed ambition, and his public persona. Where *Snakes on a Plane* was a modest Hollywood thriller that flaunted its lack of subtext, while the former was a personal project right from the start, fraught with naked pain and clumsy ambition.

One of the other reasons that *The Room* continues to be such a successful draw wherever it may go laid has to do with the way it was advertised. As mentioned in the dedicated chapter, Tommy Wiseau leased space on a large billboard, which was used to advertise and the film and its website (it is worth nothing that it's not simple *that* there was a billboard that *The Room* gained cult traction; it was because of strangeness of the poster itself [its composition, its layout] and its unlikely ubiquity). He went to screenings of his film, something he continues to do to this day, occasionally with co-star Greg Sestero in tow. The movie's website, as previously noted, is a veritable carnival of bad HTML and worse formatting. But in its own twisted manner, the website (much like Tommy Wiseau's public persona) can be considered like an important piece of paratext that is inextricably linked to the work itself.

Paratexts, as defined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette, are defined as "accompanying productions" to a literary text. (Génette 1) He also states in the introduction to his book *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* that the core function of the paratext serves to "make present" a work of art (in this case, a book) and "to ensure

the text's presence in the world." (Génette 1) In essence, paratext serves to give a book its "bookness," or as the case may be, a movie its "movieness." But the key to viewing *The Room*'s website as paratext lays in Genette's quoting of academic biographer Philippe Lejeune, in which he states that paratext is ultimately "a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's reading of the text." (Génette 2) Or, as the case is for a film, something that is parenthetical to the text that informs it in the mind's eye of the viewer. The examples of paratext with regard to book as given by Genette are each given their own chapter in the book. The examples he gives early on are the simplest and most obvious: "an author's name, a title, a preface, illustrations." He goes on to split paratext into two distinct categories: peritext and epitext. Peritext is defined as the portion of the paratext that takes up actual physical space within the work in question. The examples listed above are all examples of a book's peritext. Analogous concepts in the film world would be title screens, credits, bloopers and anything else on the screen that, strictly speaking, is not "part of the movie," yet signals its status as a movie. The productions that are not directly in the work (and that usually fall under the umbrella term of "media" or "communication" is considered the epitext. This includes interviews, correspondence, transcripts, videos and most anything related to promotion, up to and including websites. Epitext itself is further split into several different sub-categories including public epitext and publisher's epitext. It's in this latter category that a film's website would fall under. Says Genette:

> [...] its basically marketing and "promotional" function does not always involve the responsibility of the author in a very meaningful way; [...] What we are talking about here are posters, advertisements, press releases and other prospectuses [...], periodical bulletins addressed to booksellers, and

> “promotional dossiers for the use of the sales rep. Our media-oriented era will no doubt see other props exploited, and publishers' commercials have already been hear and seen on radio and television. (347)

In the spirit of that quotation, it's not a stretch to consider a movie's promotional material (posters, press releases, interviews, etc.) as a kind of paratext. The arrival of the Internet created a whole new way to advertise, and thus needed the creation of a new style of advertising. Since it stands to reason that what worked for radio did not necessarily work for television or print, Web pages presented their own brand of challenge. The Internet, more than any other medium, was something to be engaged with. It's something that, by its very structure, permits a depth of involvement that can't be achieved through the constraints of the written word alone. Stories can become multilayered and multifaceted, as is the case with hypertext fiction. The Internet as we currently know it has the ability to be quite immersive in its presentation and structure. This level of immersion can be used not only for the purposes of fiction, but of promotion. The marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* manages to be an effective synthesis of the two, and a great example of turning publisher's epitext on its ear. This is an example of “top down” film marketing that employed the Internet effectively, as opposed to a looser, bottom-up style of promotion that was subsequently adopted by the production company (which was the case for *Snakes on a Plane)*.

In his article “'The Blair Witch Project': Film and the Internet,” Georgia Tech professor J. P. Tellote discusses how the movie's website helped turn a modest student film into a world-wide blockbuster. Part of it, he argues, is the film's website. As mentioned earlier, *The Blair Witch Project*'s web site wasn't so much a promotional tool (which it was, mind) as it was an extension of the film's mythology. The website purported that the

film itself, which is 100%, composed of found footage shot in and around Burkittsville, Maryland by three film students who are missing and presumed dead. The site also explained the legend of the Blair Witch, fictitious biographies for the characters and the effect of the disappearance itself. Further along, Telotte goes on to say:

> The Web site's ultimate aim, of course, is to encourage viewing of the film, to help build its audience, which it does so effectively not only by allowing us these electronic pleasures[45], but by suggesting we might also find them, and perhaps something *more*, a content for this creepy context, in the film itself. Indeed, what *The Blair Witch Project* offers is some variation on the thrills of its Web site, along with a surprising level of transformation. (Telotte)

Thus, in a very fundamental way, the web site that advertised *The Blair Witch Project* not only alerted the online world to its existence, but acted as a sort of preamble or extension of the film's mystique. It's a perfect case of epitext informing the audience's reception of the parent text.

The Room's own peculiar web presence circa its release can also be viewed through the same epitextual lens. Although as it is the case with a lot of small-time movies, producer and creator were one. Even though *The Blair Witch Project*'s online promotion was skillfully done, it was still done in tandem with a traditional wide-release old-media way (TV spots, newspaper ads, what have you), albeit with the clever twist of further cementing the pre-fab mythos of the film. As gritty and low-key as it was, it was still an ad campaign that was sustained with $20 million of Artisan Entertainment's money, which for comparison, is two-thirds of *Snakes on a Plane*'s production budget and, tellingly, over three times the total cost of *The Room.*

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[45] Here, Telotte is referencing Janet Murray's pleasures in the context of electronic narrative: immersion, agency, and transformation. (Mathijs/Mendik 267)

In the strictest sense, the website for *The Room* had the same bottom-line purpose as that of *The Blair Witch Project*: to make the wider world aware of the existence of the film and to put butts in seats. Both websites also had novel ways to achieve that end via the extension of their respective mythologies, which serves as a kind of teaser for the work itself. *The Blair Witch Project* website did this by setting its narrative in a fictitious context that was presented as true. But *The Room*'s decidedly odd brand of epitext in this case isn't so much an extension of the narrative itself as it is an aesthetic continuation of same. The film's official website telegraphs the badness of the film through the slipshod nature of its design.

Interpretation aside, the reaction to a film's ad campaign can be understood as more or less binary. Either you end up going to see the film in question or you don't. Whether people turned out on droves or not, though, was not a problem for an ultra-limited release film like *The Room*. Beyond the famous billboard at the corner of Highland and Fountain, the website was the largest promotional machination for the film. To this day, the site maintains a top-2,000,000 Alexa ranking[46], which sounds unimpressive until you realize that as of July 2013, there are nearly 700 million active websites on the Internet, which would put *The Room*'s official website in the Internet's 99th percentile. Sadly, Alexa doesn't keep legacy numbers for websites out of the world-wide top 100,000. In any case, the site fed the curiosity of the people who went to the website enough to maintain its following. Though apparent interest in the film peaked in the summer of 2009 (where Google Trends ascribes a score of 100 to what it calls “peak interest”), search activity for both “the room movie” and “tommy wiseau” has been remarkably consistent since the end of 2010. As of time of writing, the Google Trends score for “the room movie” stands at a solid 66, the

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[46] http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/theroommovie.com#trafficstats

highest it has been at since January 2011.[47]

[47] http://www.google.com/trends/explore?q=The+Room+movie#q=The%20Room%20movie%2C%20tommy%20wiseau&cmpt=q

POINT OF INTEREST #3: MEMETIC FILM

In his book *Fan Cultures*, Matt Hills dedicated a portion of the fourth chapter of the book to notions of play in fandom. More specifically, he argues that "it is important to view fans as players in the sense that they become immersed in a non-competitive and affective play." (Hills 112) He goes on further to stress the importance of the subjective viewpoint when analyzing fan communities and the way they interact with their art object of choice. Hills also dedicates much of the chapter to dismantling the notion that the fan/art object relationship exist as a monolithic system that presupposes same or similar relationships across media and genre. While this may seem self-evident to begin with (not only is it incredibly important to consider that no two people engage with the same thing in the same way, but also that no person engages with two or more things in the same way), it is crucial to understanding why some online cult communities thrive and why some die out relatively quickly.

Hill's notion of "affective play" that pops up with some regularity in the chapter is essentially tied to the idea that the fan, that is the person who engages with any given piece of art, can at once be a creator and a participant simultaneously. Or as Hills puts it, "The fans' 'oppositional subculture' must always precede and culturally support fan interpretation and affect, rather than vice versa. Taking this [...] view means considering affect as playful, as capable of 'creating culture' as well as being caught up in it." (Hills 93) This notion of cultural play is especially important when talking about cult texts, since at the core of cult circles is that same idea of affective give and take. This ties in closely to Julian Kücklich's notion of of "playbour," which basically amounts to performing unsolicited work, artistic or otherwise, as a hobby, or as Kücklich himself defines it, "the re-entry of ordinary life into play, with a concomitant valorization of play activities."

(Kücklich). For instance, those who create, edit and moderate Wikipedia pages can be said to engage in playbour, though it might be more accurate to say that since Wikipedia is a widely-used resource, that contributors and editors engage in "productive leisure" instead.

Henry Jenkins dedicates a chapter of his 2006 book *Convergence Culture* to what essentially amounts to playbour (or as he puts it, "consumer-generated content") in the context of post-Napster intellectual property battles. There's an interesting sense of progression between Jenkins' early dissection of fan activity, *Textual Poachers* (1992), and *Convergence Culture*. While both propose as a central thesis that fan activity is a social experience for the participants and a transformative experience for the cultural object of choice, the latter book has the advantage of being able to consider the Internet and its wider influence as something *current* rather than nascent, making this particular tome more directly relevant[48]. In *Convergence Culture*'s fourth chapter, which is dedicated to the dissection of the production and politics of *Star Wars* fan films and Big Media's tortured relationship with its creators, Jenkins has this to say about the role of the computer in the increase in fan productions:

> Initially, the computer offered expanded opportunities for interacting with media content, and as long as it operated on that level, it was relatively easy for media companies to commodify and control what took place. Increasingly, though, the Web has become a site of consumer participation than includes many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media content. Though this new participatory culture has its roots in practices that have occurred just below the radar of the media industry throughout the twentieth

48 I should note that *Textual Poachers* itself has not been rendered obsolete due to the Internet's arrival into the mainstream. There's just one less step now to drawing contextual parallels.

> century, the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground, forcing the media industries to confront its implications for their commercial interests. Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods – on their own terms – is something else altogether. (137)

In essence, modern Internet-driven fan activities, especially those involving larger properties like *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*[49], exist in an uneasy grey area where enthusiasm and litigiousness are always threatening to step on each other's toes. But the risk of litigation is commonly associated with properties that are very profitable, and thus don't really come into play when talking about a modestly-budgeted mid-card summer film and an independently-produced dud. This "out of sight, out of mind" approach to intellectual property laws allows grey-area fan work to flow more freely for smaller, less popular properties.

But in the case of both large-scale and small-scale fan activity, fan art generally falls under the rubric of playbour since even though work has been put into a creation, it doesn't serve the same practical purpose as the work of the aforementioned Wikipedia editors. But the purpose it does serve is to give the sources of the fan art a kind of memetic capital, that is to say the ability the reach more people through a newly-minted node so as to help them become *memes* proper. It basically keeps the object in question alive in the eyes of the audience. In some cases, the fan art starts an extended feedback loop that brings in more people into the fray, while other times fandoms more or less fizzle out in spite of the initial enthusiasm. In this chapter, I will take a closer look at how affective

[49] For example, fan filmmakers and fan musicians who create works inspired by the *Harry Potter* franchise are more or less bound by law not to release anything officially and/or charge money for it.

play and the memetics of fan art contribute to the health and duration of a given cult phenomena, using this thesis' two main source texts as my primary examples.

When talking about online cult film fan communities, the one that surrounded *Snakes on a Plane* is a strange little outlier. First of all, as far as longevity goes, its lifespan was incredibly brief considering the hype that was initially attached to it. Secondly, it's one of the few examples in recent memory of a cult audience gaining and losing momentum in record time, casting into doubt what constitutes a cult film and/or a cult audience (by which I mean, a cult film is, for lack of a better definition, a "marginal" film with a small, potent, self-sustaining fan base). But during its brief shining moment of cultdom in 2006-07, *Snakes on a Plane* did exemplify Hills' notion of affective play along with the idea or playbour-as-self-mythologizing.

One of the advantages of being part of a relatively small online community is that it is fairly easy to track traffic to, from, and within your particular group. That is to say, it's easier to acknowledge everything being said and done about you and yours and to keep things centralized. An example of this can be seen with *Snakes on a Blog*'s sourcing and cataloguing of *SoaP*-related fan art. As previously noted, the overall quality of the produced fan art itself could generously be called amateurish, but it speaks to one of the characteristics of cult audiences (and often of the work these circles tend to champion): inclusiveness over exclusiveness, and enthusiasm over skill. The quality of the fan art produced betrays (or in some cases, underscores) the appeal that the film and its community have to a select few. But on such a small scale, this inclusiveness has the long-term adverse effect of greatly shortening a given community's lifespan. By being loosely curated, the fanbase doesn't build up the kind of robustness or size that could help it gain memetic traction.

This where the link to memetics becomes especially important. Coined by Richard Dawkins and originally used in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene* in the context of evolutionary biology, *memetics* is, in a roundabout way, the study of cultural transmission where a *meme* (Dawkins' term of choice) is a "unit of culture." While the unit in question is traditionally held to be an idea, philosophy or something of the like, it doesn't take much of a leap to assume that an art object (a film, a TV series, an album, etc.) can also constitute a Dawkinsian meme. In fact, works of art fall closer in line to Dawkins' own revised definition of *meme* that appeared in his later book *The Extended Phenotype* (1982), where the culture being transferred from person to person becomes more concrete, that is to say going past philosophies and behaviours to tangible works of art For the purposes of this thesis, I will argue that both definitions of *meme* are applicable when talking about works of art (concrete), the manner in which they are transmitted between people and the communities that spring from a select few of them given a set of optimal socio-cultural and -economic conditions (abstract). This is not to be confused with the similar but entirely separate concept of *virality*, which will be covered in greater detail further on. But in short, while something with memetic properties tends to survive, something with viral properties tends to burn twice as bright as far as exposure and "contamination" is concerned, but only lasts half as long. A classic is memetic, a fad is viral. To quote Neal Stephenson, from his seminal cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash*:

> "We are all susceptible to the pull of viral ideas. Like mass hysteria. Or a tune that gets into your head that you keep on humming all day until you spread it to someone else. Jokes. Urban legends. Crackpot religions. Marxism. No matter how smart we get, there is always this deep irrational part that makes us potential hosts for self-replicating information." (399)

Obviously, if one were to use this particular theory to talk about the creation of fan bases instead of the propagation of philosophies from human to human, one must adapt the Dawkins theory to fit this new model. Thankfully, it is easy to transpose both definitions of memes to work inside the model of fan communities. Where memes are transferred from person to person in the classic sense, they do so either horizontally (i.e. through viruses or other biological means) or vertically (i.e. through genetics or learned behaviour). In his 1996 book *Thought Contagion*, writer Aaron Lynch outlined seven more specific manners in which memes propagate, with respect to the original two. Of particular interest in this case is Lynch's "cognitive pattern:"

> If an idea seems well founded exposed to it, then non-hosts tend to adopt it, and hosts retain it. That perceived cogency to the total population provides an idea with its *cognitive* advantage. [...] Cognitively favoured ideas usually spread more passively than ideas emphasizing the other modes [of transmission]. Rather than actively programming the host's retransmitting behaviour, the belief's contagiousness depends heavily on the other ideas and cognitive traits of the population. Thus the cognitively propagated idea 'is propagated' rather than 'propagates itself'." (7)

In essence, cultural units that are transmitted cognitively according to Lynch's definition benefit from being a good idea. The idea being transmitted travels with more ease if the people in the given environment think it's a good idea and if it fits in line with their already-present ideas and beliefs. This is how fads and styles are transmitted, but also more abstract notions like individual behaviours in a group. If we transpose this notion into the context of an online fan base, we can pick out the kinds of predispositions that would lead to the small, brief and rabid championing of a movie like *Snakes on a Plane*.

One of the ways in which online communities grow is through word-of-mouth. Traffic is often driven to a person or place simply by virtue of having somebody else talking about it. Traffic is the result of new lines being created between nodes, and of pages gaining what amounts to memetic capital (in fact, this very notion forms the soul of what ended up becoming social networks, in that at its core is a series links that help the transmission of information). Plus, generally speaking, websites, forums and chat rooms often focus on a central theme, especially when said website is a fan site. If a place declares itself as a central hub focusing on a particular subject, it becomes a lightning rod for other people who are interested in the same thing. As defined by both Dawkins and Lynch, the meme, or unit of culture, doesn't really do all that much by its lonesome. It lets the propagators and hosts (i.e. the fans) do the bulk of the heavy lifting, and in the process finds a niche in which it can thrive[50].

What's peculiar about *Snakes on a Plane*'s particular case is that interest in this meme mostly fizzled out by the time 2007 rolled around. On a basic level, if we continue to use the Dawkinsian model of memetics, *Snakes on a Plane* was simply just a weak meme that succumbed to natural selection. It died out because the audience couldn't sustain itself. This is par for the course: when a meme has nothing going for it other than a certain level of novelty, its half-life is drastically reduced. There is an analogous concept in comedy writing which states that something ceases to become funny when people have seen/heard that thing too often. Some cultural artifacts can survive over-exposition, but most cannot.

Another part of the reason that *Snakes on a Plane* couldn't sustain an audience is

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[50] That said, there are surely pockets of the Internet where *Snakes on a Plane* is still, memetically speaking, held in high regard. But such pockets are so negligible as far as number and size are concerned that they could not be considered currently memetic.

because it only partly had the makings of a cult phenomenon, or in other words, a self-sustaining meme. While it had the bizarre origins story and an amusingly blunt title that showcases the "exploitation film" portion of its DNA, too much of it felt like a standard Hollywood film, not wild or silly or shocking or obtuse enough to engender the kind of obsessive gaze that cult films so often require/create. In short, *Snakes on a Plane* fails in creating what Umberto Eco called "a completely furnished world," (Eco) because as he astutely observed, cult movies aren't so much about their formal qualities, but about the minutiae therein. Eco also references "gaps" in these movies that are filled out by the audience, which lends them in part their cult appeal. This could be another reason explaining why *Snakes on a Plane* lost its head of steam when it was initially released. The fact that this was a movie released by a major Hollywood studio, which sunk $33 million USD into this project, streamlined a film that many assumed would be more unhinged than it was. The niche audience (i.e. the online fan base) was sacrificed for the bottom line. New Line knew that there was an audience for the film, but seemingly didn't know what *kind* of audience. Says Gina Marchetti:

> [...]From the perspective of subcultural studies, specific film audiences become active, creative forces. The subculture[51] opens up the possibility for the viewer to look at a film in a particular way, often actively misreading an apparently straightforward fantasy. Moreover, the subculture may give rise to unique film exhibition environments in which film viewing behaviour may differ radically from more common behaviour at local suburban multiplexes. (Marchetti)

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[51] Strictly speaking, a subculture is basically a cultural group inside a cultural group, which makes it a pretty wide umbrella term. In this case, it could very well apply to a section of film fans, specifically online ones, inside the greater culture-wide cinephilia.

The final script of *Snakes on a Plane*, as most major-studio scripts do, ended up going through a number of punch-ups and rewrites. In essence, since the script had been professionally tightened up before filming (even though there were minor reshoots done after principal photography was over with), the film was removed from its pure exploitation roots and made more palatable. The movie that was in the imaginations of the fan base was not going to be the movie on the screen, and the reactions that were needed to give film life couldn't take root in a multiplex.

In a way, the fact that *Snakes on a Plane* was relatively standard fare as far as action films were concerned doomed it to imminent disinterest when set in contrast with its origins and fan expectations. That isn't to say that the other film being discussed, *The Room*, is a better film, at least from a technical and formal point of view. As it has been pointed out time and time again, ringleader Tommy Wiseau fails at even the most basic tenets of filmmaking. But unlike the competent-but-boring industry lifer David Ellis, Tommy Wiseau defends his work and its origins as a Tennessee Williams-style drama tooth-and-nail and, judging by his sporadic video appearances and his bizarre Twitter feed (which would indeed be more *Room* paratext by virtue of his still-ongoing promotion of it), is a full-on genuine eccentric. These traits play right into what Mathijs and Sexton call the notion of the "cult auteur."

Obviously, the term "cult auteur" is indebted to *Cahiers du cinéma*/Andrew Sarris-style auteurism, one of the more influential and prevalent lenses through which scholars and critics analyze movies. What started as a way to honour the ignored or forgotten artists of the studio system had the side effect of placing the director front-and-centre in regard to being "the face of the movie."[52] Even in the context of lesser-known/Z-grade/ephemeral

[52] Obviously, this isn't always the case: many name actors cast as huge a shadow on the movies they're in as the studio stars of yore. It's part of the reason something like *Risky Business* is a "Tom Cruise movie"

movies, the tendency is to skew to the director as the work's centre of gravity. Part of *The Room*'s enduring popularity is at least partially explainable by the reactions to Wiseau himself. *The Room* has, in part, been buoyed by the memetic strength of Wiseau's media presence propagated by paratexts such as websites, interviews and, as mentioned above, Wiseau's on Twitter feed.. Arguably, *Snakes on a Plane* also had a form of memetic charisma as an initial driving force which sustained interest in the film: star Samuel L. Jackson, because an actor can be equally memetic and paratextual, but not in the same context. Jackson himself has memetic capital because of his interviews, roles and method, but serves as paratext only in instances where he is not performing (i.e. interviews)[53]. But, as actors do, they move on to different projects and bring their promotional acumen with them. Once the film's mouthpiece leaves the spotlight, it's up to the fans to keep the faith, so to speak. Wiseau, whose last major work today is still *The Room*, has been constantly touring behind his baby and talking about it to anyone who will hear. The relative omnipresence of Wiseau on the Internet likely also fuels the fire. There's also an aura of mystery surrounding Wiseau, since we're not privy to his pre-*Room* origins. Say Mathis and Sexton:

> One particularly important thread feeding into the status of many cult directors is the importance of extra-textual information. Unlike in many cases of more traditional auteurism, where the actual biography of the individual was far less important than the connections running through a cinematic oeuvre, the celebration of a cult creator is highly dependent upon his or her reputation. Biographical information and other types of activities that promote the

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while *The Dark Knight* is a "Christopher Nolan movie."

[53] In her book *The Meme Machine*, Susan Blackmore states that both the constituent parts of a piece of art and its whole can be mimetic, using as an example the introduction to Beethoven's 5th Symphony and the symphony as a hole both being memetic.

visibility of a particular figure may be crucial in establishing a cult status. (68)

Another reason why *Snakes on a Plane* did not have the same longevity as a cult object as *The Room* or any number of other similar films is that the promotional material, for lack of a more academic term, trumpeted its own cult horn. The amount of secondary material circulated by New Line for what essentially amounts to a minor film in that company's roster ensured that the film would reach its viral saturation point way too fast. That isn't to say that a dearth of promotion necessarily leads to cult fame (or infamy, as it were), but it does reflect one of the core tenants of film promotion at any level: proclaiming your own cult status, directly or otherwise, is a sure-fire way to deflate any “cult capital” you might have accumulated. In a way, it violates the secret-handshake nature of cult fandom.

What gets lost in the conversation about cult audiences is the importance that geography plays in how popular a cult item gets. Chances are, if you're mostly operating in a major metropolitan area, your small-time piece of work is likelier to gain traction that if it were playing in a smaller cultural centre. *The Room*, for example, was shot and shown exclusively in Los Angeles during its original run. It also benefited from celebrity fans and Tommy Wiseau's suspiciously large billboard budget, but these can also be conflated with the film's L.A.-only release. It's important to note that while *The Room* was initially happening, only an infinitesimal fraction of the American population knew that it even existed. As far as the film's fan base was concerned, it was more or less concentrated in the Greater Los Angeles Area. If we consider *Snakes on a Plane*'s fan base, which mostly manifested itself online, this film did not have a particular area in which its exhibition was more concentrated. The film has a typical national release pattern. The potential members of that particular cult were too few and spread out to sustain the film beyond a modest

theatrical run. By virtue of its spread-out real-life fan base, *Snakes on a Plane* did not have the solid, organic foundation that most cult phenomena stem from. When it comes to box office performance, geographical proximity is still key.

That isn't to say that mostly decentralized fan bases cannot coalesce into a self-sustaining cult phenomenon. Other means of decentralized transmission, notably television, can lead to a movie or TV show becoming a cult item. This is especially true in the case of pay cable like HBO, or in the case of a Los Angeles-specific example, Z Channel. But geography does play an important part in how (and, in some cases, even if) a film get screened and released. When people think of midnight movies and important one-off screenings (think a 70mm print of *2001: A Space Odyssey* [Stanley Kubrick, 1968]or a showing or a restores print of Abel Gance's *Napoléon* [1927]), three American cities usually come to mind: Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. A movie can't get considered for an Academy Award unless it plays in Los Angeles during a specific time of the year. Many independent and international productions only get limited runs in these cities, never showing beyond them. Even with the advent of the Internet, geography still governs cinephilia. Granted, it's much easier to be in a cinephile in, say, Ulysses, KS today that it would have been up until the home video boom. And with online retailers, Netflix, the Criterion Collection, file-sharing, private torrenting sites, and even YouTube all pulling their share of the weight, it's easier than ever for someone to see what they want, when they want. Also, with the omnipresence of social media and the ready availability of blogging platforms, it's incredibly easy to connect with like-minded fans and create fan networks that span the globe. In short, proximity to a large population basin increases a film's traction of gaining traction. This is as true for Hollywood movies as it is for cult items. However, the Internet is also capable of creating audiences, but given the

decentralized nature of the fan groups and the relative slowness with which these audiences are formed, they are more well-suited for long-term word-of-mouth base-building.

Geography becomes even more important when talking about cult items specifically. The yardstick against which all theatrical cult phenomena are measured is without a doubt *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, still playing in limited release to this day after 38 years in the market. One of the more visible long-term runs the film had was the regular midnight screenings held at the Waverly Theatre (now the IFC Centre) in New York[54]. *The Room* is nearing a full decade of limited release in Los Angeles. The cult of *Casablanca* at the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge is strong enough that it still plays every Valentine's Day. For a midnight movie or a repeat screening to work, there has to be a steady stream of relatively film-literate audience members, which is why movies like *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *The Room* have an easier time gaining traction in largely-populated areas.

Ultimately, the relative success of a cult film, or how memetic it can get, is achieved much in the same way as any other work of art: through a network of people. When discussing cult movies, the network in question is necessarily a niche one, though not necessarily a weak one. The Internet has simply facilitated how quickly and how strongly those webs get spun.

[54] The longest still-running series of regular *Rocky Horror Picture Show* screening is held by the Oriental in Milwaukee, WI. It's the Midwest exception, along with Chicago, that proves the coastal rule.

FURTHER DISCUSSION

So at the end of all this, where do we place *The Room* and *Snakes on a Plane* in the context of cult movies, and how has the Internet come to shape their reception as such? Using the Mathijs/Mendik definition of cult film, only one of them is truly a cult film. Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* truly is the great modern exponent of the golden era or midnight movies, and the heir-apparent to *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s throne. No movie since *Rocky Horror* has had the dedicated fanbase, screening happenings and under-the-radar longevity as *The Room*. Its cult status is more or less cemented. Said status came in a traditional cult fashion: a local grassroots fanbase that was initially grown through word-of-mouth, then through print media and the Internet. Once it gained a foothold in the collective online consciousness, it transcended the viral and appears to have reached the level of a strong Dawkinsian meme. To this day, the movie still holds its traditional midnight screening in Los Angeles, along with a successful, seemingly never-ending roadshow and its own miniature cottage industry. Ten years after its initial release, *The Room* has proven to be the real deal, and concrete proof that the cult film is alive and well in the Internet era.

Snakes on a Plane presents a whole different set of concerns. Strictly speaking, it did have an engaged fanbase and its own grassroots following, but it has the curious distinction of having been formed *before* the release of the actual film. In fact, the cult surrounding *Snakes on a Plan* centred its very fandom around a film that, up until that point, *did not exist yet*. The fans of the film were fans of the movie they *thought* they were going to see; this ended up being *Snakes on a Plane*'s fatal flaw. It was not the self-aware piece of bad film everyone in the fanbase was hoping it was going to be. What they got was a competently-made but fairly rote action-thriller that had very little of the wildness or

ridiculousness of its title or production history. But the film itself is only one of the reasons that *Snakes on a Plane* didn't reach the cult status it seemed destined to achieve.

Firstly, *Snakes on a Plane* did not have the perfect memetic storm of *The Room*. The latter film had an Ed Wood-style genuine eccentric at the centre of its media cult, who doubles as a self-styled auteur. The film wasn't just bad, but astonishingly so. The film's production wasn't so much rocky as it was misguided. It was the classic case of somebody with resources, enthusiasm and authority, but no discernible skill. Compare this to *Snakes on a Plane*'s lifespan. While it did have a memetic figurehead in actor Samuel L. Jackson, his particular brand of charisma was already a known quantity. Part of the reason Wiseau (and consequently, *The Room*) feels so compelling is because it, in a way, came out of absolutely nowhere. In a way, this also has something to do with how both films were promoted. Both movies had a website run by their respective production companies; New Line Cinema for *Snakes on a Plane* and Wiseau Films for *The Room*. While *Snakes on a Plane*'s promotional website followed a fairly standard model in the industry, *The Room*'s acted like an extension of the film itself, and of its creator. In short, it made for the better epitext. Work, creator, and promotional material fused into one seamless whole the gave the movie legs. Since it stood outside accepted notions of quality, taste, and production, *The Room* fits very well into that idea of the cinematic other that cult movies embodies. It was idiosyncratic, marginal, and jarring in its unique badness. But it was also clearly one deluded man's passion project that he was going to show the world come hell or high water. *The Room* was beyond just a flop; it was, in a way, a perfect storm of failure. It bears repeating: not all cult films are bad, and not all bad films are cult, but all bad cult films share one thing in common: naivete of purpose and/or intent.

Curiously, both movies were saddled with non-representative trailers, but for two

completely different reasons. In the case of *Snakes on a Plane*, the trailers had the atmospherics and cues of a horror film, when in reality the film fell more along the lines of an action/thriller B-movie. This was a decision made on behalf of the studio in order to cater to a wider audience. In the process, though, they likely alienated the movie's pre-release fans while bringing in people who were less enthusiastic about the film than they had hoped. *The Room*'s trailer, however, has the distinction of being released *after* the initial release of the film, partially in order to save face with regards to its content. Though for all intents and purposes a drama film, *The Room*'s post-release trailer tried to pass off the film as a black comedy. Strangely, the trailer itself still had the cues and beats of a dramatic feature, and the only aspect of it that pointed it in the direction of a black comedy was the voice-over in the trailer, for one brief instant. Further discussion about how trailers serve as epitext and shape audience expectation with regard to cult film, taking into consideration the tendencies and tics of a cult audience, could easily be framed using these same two films.

In both cases, the Internet had an impact on how each film's fanbase was built and maintained. In the case of *Snakes on a Plane*, the Internet created a central hub for far-flung fans of the film prior to its premiere. Early adopters created various kinds of fan art ranging from humorous videos to drawings and clothing. *The Room*'s fans created viewing guides and video games. Both movies' fan practices were driven, at least in part, by the user-friendliness of the Internet. For nearly a year before the film was even released, *Snakes on a Plane* had a rabid fan base because of what was available of the film's epitext on the Internet. This includes the standard press-junket trappings of interviews with the cast and crew and teaser trailers, but also insider blog posts, media speculation and, specifically, the pronouncements of star Samuel L. Jackson. But once said epitext became

secondary with the film's release, the film dwindles in popularity and the once-vibrant audience fizzled out.

In contrast, *The Room*'s success lays in part to its classical cult-style fanbase acquisition, its slow-burn march into the fringe of the mainstream and the continued presence of the film's main players *within the context* of the cult object in question. The small scale of the initial operation (i.e. independently financed, extremely limited theatrical run, produced completely out of the system) made it, to borrow a term from evolutionary biology, a stronger meme. Its constituent parts and its environment favoured *The Room* as cult object, all the while bolstered by an online system that multiplied the number of hubs, or "hosts," likely to be infected by the film's viral charm. It's a case of infamy over hype, the former being more prosperous for longevity as far as cult films and cult audiences are concerned.

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